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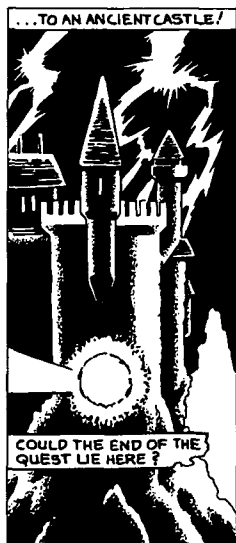
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Cover by Michael Whelan

NOVEMBER 1982

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AMAZINGTM Science Fiction Stories combined with FANTASTICTM Stories Volume 28 Number 8, November 1982. AMAZING Stories (ISSN 0279-6848) is published bi-monthly by Dragon Publishing, a division of TSR Hobbies, Inc., P.O. Box 110, Lake Geneva WI 53147. Single copy price: \$1.50 plus 50 cents postage and handling. Subscription rates: \$9 for 6 issues (one year) or \$16 for 12 issues (two years) sent to U.S. or Canadian addresses; in all other countries, subscription rates are \$15 for 6 issues or \$28 for 12 issues. Subscriptions must be paid for in advance in U.S. funds.

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opinion

Robert Silverberg

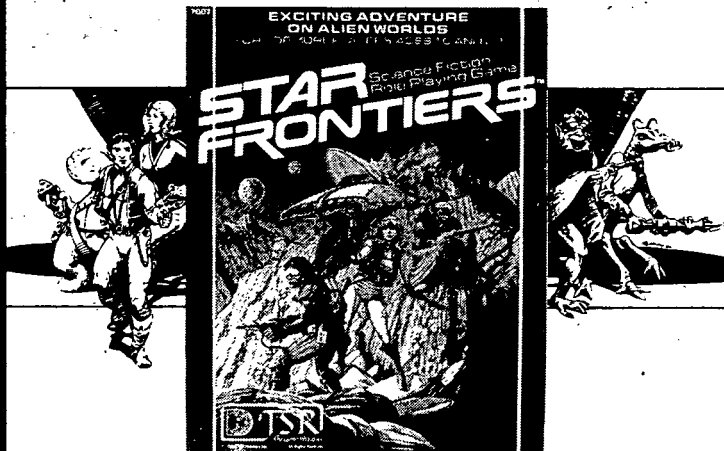
I'M A FAIRLY accessible man, my address is not hard to find, and I get a lot of letters. People want to tell me how wonderful or how faulty my books are, to ask me to give opinions on their unpublished short stories, to suggest to me the plot for a sequel to *Lord Valentine's Castle*, to analyze the time-travel theory of *Up The Line*, or to inveigle me into buying the magazines they publish. I answer some of these letters with postcards, some with full and detailed responses, and some not at all. I also write to my publishers on three or four continents, my agents, various editors, and sometimes to my mother. It's a lot of typing.

I'm not the only writer who writes a lot of letters. I know that Harlan Ellison does, Fred Pohl does, Barry Malzberg does; I suspect Algis Budrys does, and even got one from him lately that I really ought to answer. Ernest Hemingway was a big letter-writer. I know that because I'm reading his *Selected Letters* right now, and, "selected" or not, they fill 921 closely packed large octavo pages. That's a bigger volume by far than any of his novels, and he didn't write all that many novels. Might

we have had another Hemingway novel if he hadn't been such a diligent correspondent? Would the long-hoped-for Ellison novel now be on the stands if Harlan were not so passionate a writer of letters? How much vital creative time, I wonder, do we all consume in this frantic exchange of correspondence? Consider H.P. Lovecraft's five-volume set of published letters — and read those letters, which are rich and intricate and full of vital energy. Sure, Lovecraft as correspondent was instrumental in helping the growth of half a dozen brilliant fantasy writers who were dependent on him for opinions — but at what cost to HPL?

Hemingway is pretty explicit about it. "Any time I can write a good letter it's a sign I'm not working," he said. And writing letters was "such a swell way to keep from working and yet feel you've done something." I think he's right; and I think a writer who writes a lot of letters is generally a writer who's in trouble. (Although there are exceptions to that. I can think of at least three science-fiction writers of the generation just prior to mine who have endured writing blocks of legendary pro-

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portions through much of the careers, and who don't much answer their mail, either.)

Correspondence is valuable to a writer, of course. It provides input from a wide variety of sources; and the output that that input generates yields useful opportunities for exploring and clarifying one's own ideas. It allows the writer to work stuff out of his system, too, that might interfere with the process of creativity. I choose to pick up my mail at the post office before I begin my working day, and if there's anything there that irritates or annoys me (there was one this morning!) I usually deal with it first thing, so that it's not preying on my mind while I'm trying to send my characters off to adventure in the Zorch Galaxy. There's always the danger, of course, that I'll use up vital adrenaline on the letter that might be better consumed on the story, but it's a risk I'm willing to take. Only last week, for instance, I dealt with a dumb and infuriating letter moments after coming back from the post office, working up a fine head of steam; and then, with the dispute and the disputant out of my way, I rattled off a very nifty short story in a single sitting, something that I've rarely done in the past ten or twelve years. Could it be that the outrageous Mr. X got me so energized that I worked at two or three times my normal pace? Or was I just hitting on all cylinders that morning? (I know the story's a good one. An editor just told me so and put many simoleons in my pocket to prove

her point.)

Hemingway also notes the value of letter-writing as a warm-up exercise for the brain. John Steinbeck, whose collected letters fill a volume about as big as Hemingway's — I love reading the letters of other writers — made a particular point of handling his correspondence before he began work every day, and plainly it was a trick that worked for him, for he did manage to produce a shelfload of books and even win a Nobel Prize, although, it must be noted, neither a Hugo nor a Nebula.

But even so, I think writers less proficient than Steinbeck or Hemingway ought to be cautious about their correspondence loads. In the peculiar world of science fiction, with its astonishing degree of contact between writer and reader and between writer and writer, the potential for getting into brilliant and exhausting exchanges of correspondence is enormous. At the Denver convention a few months ago I gave my address to five or six people, warning all of them that although I'd be glad to continue our discussions by mail, I was a slow and unreliable correspondent. And so I am, though I'm neither slow nor unreliable in any other aspect of my life; but I let the letters pile up, giving quick response only to the ones that say **HELP** or **FOR GOD'S SAKE HURRY** or **PLEASE SIGN THE ENCLOSED CONTRACT AND RETURN IT AT ONCE** or **MY SECONDS WILL CALL ON YOU IN THE MORNING**

UNLESS. I also have two or three regular correspondents with whom I've been exchanging letters steadily for years, and they get premium treatment, because the value I derive from those correspondences outweighs, to me, the value I might get from putting equivalent energy into turning out more fiction.

But everybody else, including people I like a good deal as well as the total strangers who want favors, gets put into the when-I-get-a-chance heap, and for a lot of them the chance never comes. It's a matter of creative survival. I know all too well how easy it is to write letters instead of stories; I also know that the royalty checks on my Collected Letters are going to go to my estate, not to me, and won't help much in paying the bills that also arrive in the morning mail. A word of caution, then, to those who expect writers to reply faithfully to their mail: you may be stealing the next Hugo winner from us all. And to writers who find themselves turning enthusiastically to their

correspondence instead of to that overdue manuscript: you may be fooling yourself, but not the rest of us.

One essential technique in handling correspondence should be kept in mind by all writers. I learned it from that cagey old pro, L. Sprague de Camp, decades ago. In the right-hand drawer of my desk I keep, at all times, fifty or sixty postal cards. It's impossible to be very verbose when you answer mail with postal cards. You save a penny or two on postage, besides, and the cost of an envelope, and all that hard work of licking and sealing the flap. But the key thing is that by dashing off a postcard you fulfill your karmic obligations, you keep the flow of communication flowing, you make your correspondents reasonably happy, and *you can get down to work*. Unless, like Lovecraft, you consider your correspondence your real work and your fiction an incidental matter, that's important to bear in mind.

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BOOK REVIEWS

by Tom Staicar

Friday by Robert A. Heinlein, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, \$14.95

Return From the Stars by Stanislaw Lem, Avon, \$2.95 (paper).

Planet of the Gawfs by Steve Vance, Leisure, \$1.50 (paper).

Spaceways #1: Of Alien Bondage by John Cleve, Playboy Paperbacks, \$2.50 (paper).

If you use your credit card or checking account, an electronic trail allows the IRS, FBI, CIA, and phone company to trace where you live, work, eat, shop, and bank. Wide-angle cameras and videotape systems show security officers what you are doing at all times in J.C. Penney and Sears stores. Multinational corporations control many seemingly unrelated companies through shared directors and proxy voting.

All of the above is true today and is not science fiction. What Robert A. Heinlein has done in his novel *Friday* is to extrapolate from just this sort of factual data and give us a highly believable glimpse at the future through the eyes of one of his finest characters. *Friday* is nothing short of magnificent.

Friday Jones (her last name having been picked up as she left her childhood environment of a genetic manipulation laboratory) is a young woman who is an agent for someone she knows only as "Boss."

Whether the work to which Boss assigns her will benefit a multinational, a corporate nation, or someone behind the scenes, she is not certain. *Friday* is nearly always in deadly peril, carrying a message inside a surgically-created pouch in her navel, or gathering information to be used for some vital purpose she knows nothing about.

After a brief but incredibly informative opening section, Heinlein gets us totally on Friday's side as she is suddenly ambushed by thugs, blindfolded, gang-raped by four men, and then subjected to horrible torture. As we start to think in terms of some nasty tortures to apply to the thugs in revenge, Friday is dwelling only upon her possible rescue.

There is no one better at imparting background information within a story than Heinlein. His technique features the casual mention of a beanstalk tragedy that causes people to use a different city for a ride in a space elevator, or a remark by Friday that everyone has their own Red Thursday story to tell (the day when terrorists began assassinating key leaders and the world went into nuclear war alert). We become aware of relevant data effortlessly and Heinlein never lets the pace of action slow for a moment.

Friday insists she is not human. What she means is that she is the result of the combination of genetic materials from several people and

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emerged from the laboratory as an Artificial Person (AP). APs are hated and shunned by the people of most countries. This has made Friday a painfully alienated woman, possessing super powers which she must hide. She desperately yearns for love, security, and a real family, but keeps her mind on her work anyway.

The states of the U.S. and the regions of other countries have fragmented into dictatorships and democracies, often at war. In moving from place to place, Friday and others run the risk of being glimpsed by a computer's camera when a credit card is rejected and burned as the person tries to use it. The police are instantly on the way to question the fugitive or newcomer to the area.

As Friday says: "In the world of credit cards, a person has *no* privacy . . . or at best protects her privacy only with great effort and much chicanery. Besides that, do you *ever* know what the computer network is doing when you poke your card into a slot? I don't. I feel much safer with cash. I've never heard of anyone who had much luck arguing with a computer." (p.203)

Nations are actually secondary to the more powerful corporations, linked together with secret subsidiaries and able to dictate to the world's leaders.

Heinlein makes a strong argument in favor of individual freedom and its value, while telling the fascinating story of a highly sexed female James Bond who contends

with a world that could have come from the pages of 1984 or Brunner's *Shockwave Rider*. Americans already seem to be living in accordance with Heinlein's definitions of a sick culture (summarized in *Friday* as lack of identification with a nation rather than a race or religion, high taxation, deficit spending, runaway crime, people on the public payroll in high numbers, and a pervasive lack of manners and increase in rudeness). Let's hope we can find solutions. The future of space colonies, cities on Mars, and easy travel to deep space will only work as a release valve or an escape route if ways are found to stay free in the face of special police, ignorant hordes who remain prejudiced and intolerant, and other problems of our depleted planet. Read *Friday* and then try *not* to relate it to today's world.

Alienation is also a theme in the 1961 Stanislaw Lem novel *Return From the Stars*, new in paperback. Although some Lem books have suffered from faulty translations, Barbara Marszal and Frank Simpson seem to have done a good job with this one. They had to coin English words which could be paired with others and keep the story moving regardless of Polish phrase translation. The word "realist" now means an actor in a "real" (a future form of television drama). Books are now either options (scanned one page at a time by the reader), or lections (which read themselves aloud).

Return From the Stars concerns

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astronaut Hal Bregg, who went into space on history's longest voyage to the stars at age thirty, and has just returned at age forty while the earth has aged 127 years. The effects of relativity have caused this to be a mixed blessing, the result being an acute state of loneliness for Hal. History books record his journey but everyone he knew is long dead and all the landmarks and customs he cherished are gone.

Simply because Lem wanted to write the story a certain way, Hal decides not to do the logical thing by going to the readjustment center to lessen the effects of culture shock. He ventures forth without friends or lodging, lacking even the rudiments of understanding of the new social graces, customs, or belief systems. Like the Beverly Hillbillies in a fancy restaurant, Hal gapes at every object and asks silly questions of everyone. He finds himself in a city similar to that in *Things To Come*, or possibly *Ralph 124C41+*.

Hal is surprised by the marvels that assist travel, cooking, and entertainment. He is astonished to see large-screen television. He peers wonderingly at women in "daring" bathing suits. He is shocked that a woman allows him to go to her apartment when they have just met. These quaint 1961 Lem reactions undermine our respect for his ability to see the future, especially when the days of miniskirts, birth control pills, couples living together, and the hippie movement were just around the corner in 1961.

The chief failing of his book is

the dependence upon soapbox lectures on philosophical points while the plot is put on hold. I was drawn to the ideas, nonetheless, and can see why other people adore Lem so much for his intellectual side.

Lem contends that removing the spirit of adventure has taken the "man out of man." A system called Betrization takes the hostile, aggressive, killer instincts out of everyone. Robots are around who can still be capable of murder in case an execution is needed for good reason, but people cannot kill anyone.

Hal and his crew are not admired, as heroism is a thing of the past. Astronauts, record-holders in sports and adventurers are thought of as primitive barbarians from the ugly twentieth century. The space voyage was rendered useless soon after it left, and its information was unnecessary due to new advances in technology.

Like *Friday*, *Return From the Stars* deals with someone who craves love and belonging in a world that has grown cold. The incredible voyage of wonder motif was already old in Gernsback's day, and Lem's writing seems slow-paced much of the time, but he does encapsulate some intriguing conjectures about the meaning of life within his books.

Oddly enough, *Planet of the Gawks* by Steve Vance also has the theme of alienation running through it. This "Inflation Fighter/Science Fiction #1" opus is priced at \$1.50 to sell like laser-warmed hotcakes, but I question whether it's not

TIME SAFARI

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overpriced. This is the type of novel that novices write, usually consigning the rejected manuscript to a desk drawer. I have no idea why Leisure not only published it in 1978 (the date was encoded in Roman numerals to avoid detection as a reprint, by the way), but *reprinted* it in 1982.

Gawfs are Godawful Freaks, the thousands of babies born after a plague mutated the genes of their parents. One adolescent has fingers growing out of his stomach and another has an eye in his forehead. Most gawfs were not slaughtered when first seen by the repressive society which hunts them down; they are exiled to an earthlike planet in another solar system. The planet is cleverly called Thear (yes, an anagram of earth, as the author admits outright).

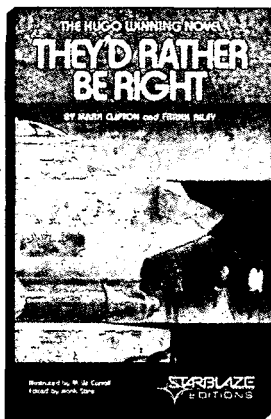
A few good scenes showing the sense of alienation and the need to belong to a group are hopelessly sunk in a quagmire of snappy, sarcastic dialogue and description: "A-One Dumb. . . .," "My jaw dropped a foot," "I was tossed in the air like a gumwrapper in a gale," and this stern warning delivered with all due seriousness: "Listen, freak, unless you want to get fried by our exhaust, you'd better take my advice and haul ass."

If this is indicative of the extreme measures being taken in the war against inflation, perhaps the enemy has been overrated. Let's not lose our heads over this thing!

John Cleve is a pseudonym sometimes used by the fine heroic

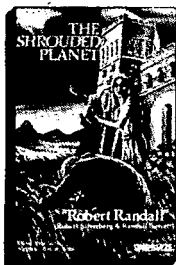
fantasy novelist Andrew J. Offutt. His *Spaceways #1: Of Alien Bondage* features a sexually suggestive cover. The banner "High Adventure for Adults" is apparently calculated to have the same effect as a high school teacher telling students: "Don't read that porno novel *Sexus* by Henry Miller."

The book by Cleve is not really pornographic. Like a jiggly TV show or a PG rated film, it titillates and has sexual content but it is not an adult book store novel. Unless one enjoys reading about a young woman being sold into slavery, raped, tortured, and otherwise abused, this initial book in the series will provide no stimulation. I was repelled by all this and then bored into semi-consciousness by the padded writing and expository lumps. My interest waned as the heroine, Janja, was brutalized by alien hermaphrodites while the intrepid, self-centered, and supposedly swashbuckling Captain Jonuta tried to stall a final confrontation with his archrival Corundum, at least until a few sequels had been sold. The novel is episodic enough to support *Spaceways #2: Corundum's Woman* and more to come. The few snippets of satire about Gor and the appeal of the species of women's novels known as bodice-rippers do not save this first book, and it seems obvious that the novel sets the role and status of women back at least a century and the cover painting makes SF look like sleazy trash. Still, it's up to you where you find your kicks, I suppose.



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AN EDITORIAL BOOK REVIEW

by Darrell Schweitzer

The Eureka Years, Boucher and McComas's Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction, 1949-54 edited by Annette Peltz McComas, Bantam, 1982, 348 pp., \$3.50 (paper).

Not only does this book bring together an excellent selection of classic fiction from the early years of our distinguished competitors, *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, but also it affords the reader a remarkably vivid glimpse of how a science-fiction magazine is run. *The Eureka Years* is the product of extensive research into the correspondence files of its founding editors. The stories (by Asimov, Sturgeon, Knight, Wellman, Anderson, Matheson, Bradbury, Dick, Dickson, and many others) are prefaced with author/editor correspondence. You can see how, by gentle prodding, Boucher and McComas caused Ray Bradbury's "The Exiles" to be rewritten into the classic story we know today.

There is also a selection of rejection letters, letters answering specific questions about the magazine and about editing, and internal memos setting

policy. Reading these gave us a — well — *amazing* sense of déjà. The field may have been very different back then, in some ways; but stories were rejected for exactly the same reasons that they are now: weak ideas, old ideas, poor development, lack of characterization, etc. Further, Boucher and McComas found themselves confronted with authors who thought they knew the magazine's policy better than the editors did, and rejected their own stories. There's a 1951 letter from no less a luminary than Isaac Asimov, mentioning his surprise in discovering that *F&SF* was receptive to his type of story after all.

The whole thing is so similar to our own experience that we're almost tempted to believe in reincarnation. The policies fit our own. We share Boucher's and McComas's interest in new writers. We have written letters just like the ones in the book.

Until somebody writes a volume about editing science-fiction magazines on the order of *Here at the New Yorker*, this is where you go to see how it's done.

* * *

Yes, we are looking for stories from people who have never sold a story before, as well as from established writers. To help you with manuscript format, cover letters, and the other details of sending in a story, and to give you some of our ideas on Plot, Background, and Characterization, we've prepared an 11,000-word booklet, *Constructing Scientificational & Fantastic Stories*. You may obtain a copy by writing to *Amazing SF Stories*, P.O. Box 110, Lake Geneva WI 53147; be sure to include your address and zip code. Since these cost us about \$1.00 each to send out, we'd appreciate receiving this amount (check or money order, please), but if you simply cannot afford this at the moment, we'll send you one free rather than have you do without. (Bulk orders are much less expensive per copy; ask for details.)

Dear Editor,

Enclosed is my epic poem, "Ode to the Existential Angst of the Meaningless 20th Century Weltanschauung, or, Thoughts While Sitting in a Laundromat Shortly Before the Heat Death of the Universe and Not Having Any Change." As you can see, this is a wholly revolutionary work in form and content. I am sure it will have as much effect on contemporary poetry as "The Waste Land" did on the poetry of the 1920s. I have freed myself wholly from the rigid strictures of conventional format. As you can clearly see, the poem is greatly enhanced, and in fact derives most of its meaning from the way I have written it in orange magic marker on yellow lined paper, which, for your convenience I have rolled up, tied with a ribbon, and am sending to you in a mailing tube.

Yours,

The Bard of Backscratch (North Dakota, Population 3½, plus the moose.)

Dear Bard,

Alas! Your poem caused the typesetter to free himself from the rigid strictures of having to read hand-written orange ink on yellow paper. Sorry. Liberty, Equality, Fraternity, and Eyestrain, I suppose.

The Editor

Dear Editor:

Enclosed is my sci-fi story. I will be perfectly happy to write you a contract for it. I got the idea from watching *Fantasy Island* the other night.

Yours, for thrilling sagas of the spaceways,
Alonzo Argh, Jr:

Dear Alonzo,

Ah... it just isn't done that way, and further we don't think TV shows are a

good source of inspiration for most writers. Perhaps TV inspired Kornbluth to write "The Marching Morons," but it doesn't seem to be working for you.

I might mention that Amazing publishes science-fiction, fantasy, and even science-fiction on occasion, but never, never sci-fi.

The Editor

Dear Mr. Gernsback,

I have labored long and hard over the enclosed manuscript, which I now submit for your consideration, faithfully placing it in the care of the United States Postal Service, which, I am sure, will get it to you shortly. You know, neither snow, nor rain, nor dark of night stays these couriers from the swift completion of their appointed rounds.

In closing I might add that I am very impressed with your most recent issue, that of December 1928. This new writer, Jack Williamson, is great! What a find! Long may he write!

Yours sincerely,

Latimer F. Jones

Dear. Mr. Jones,

We received your manuscript just the other day. Your faith in the U.S. Postal Service is really touching. We are deeply moved.

You're right about Williamson. We think he's great too!

By the way, Mr. Gernsback no longer works here.

The Editor

Dear Editor,

In response to your request for biographical information, I suggest that you run the following about me in the blurb for my upcoming story:

The author, known in his youth as "the Lawrence of Arabia of the Bronx," made a name for himself at a tender age with his unprecedented explorations of the New York subway system, during the course of which he was (by his own account) mugged less than 400 times. Spurred on by this early success, he sought adventure and danger in other lands. His finest moment came when the Peace Corps sent him to Kurdistan to determine the bulk of the average inhabitant of that country, so that all of them could be outfitted with orthopedic shoes, which a visiting senator had reported them as being in desperate need of.

The author was visiting a noted chieftain, whose name transliterates roughly as "Muh-fet," when, over a sumptuous Middle Eastern banquet, he asked the all-important question in his finest Hollywood British accent, phrasing it as only he would, "Tell me Muh-fet, how much does the average Kurd weigh?"

An unpleasant misunderstanding ensued. There were indeed difficulties. One surviving witness claimed that the real problem was that the author's monocle had dropped in the camel chip salad and was eaten by the chieftain.

Muh-fet was not available for comment. At his funeral, the author had nothing to say on the matter.

The author had literary ambitions as a boy, but because his life was crammed with romance, adventure, excitement, and intrigue, he never had time to get anything down on paper. Consequently his works had to be ghosted (post-humously) by H.P. Lovecraft, who was also dead at the time.

I remain,
Alonzo Argh, Sr. (deceased)

Oh.

The Editor

Dear Editor,

I tremble as I type this. Please excuse my poor typing. The reason I am so excited is that I have just invented a Unified Field Theory.

I am sure you get letters like this all the time. There sure are a lot of cranks around, aren't there? But I can prove that I have what I say I have. It's here in a box. Can I send it to you? I'm sure it would be of immense value to science.

Yours,

Wilbur Wateley

Dear Wilbur,

We agree that this discovery of yours is of immense value to science. But don't you think you should send it to some more prestigious journal, like Science or Scientific American, where it will come to the immediate attention of other workers in your field?

Best of luck!

The Editor

Dear Editor,

Darrell Schweitzer and Somtow Sucharitkul have been leading us on for too long, both in the pages of *Amazing* and elsewhere. I'm sick and tired of it. Can't you make them put up to shut up? Just what is the Meaning of Life?

Irritated in Idaho

Dear Irritated,

Somtow explains the Meaning of Life clearly in Mallworld (Donning/Starblaze, 1982) and Darrell does it in chapter 7 of The Shattered Goddess (Donning/Starblaze, 1982). Their explanations do not agree. One of them, who shall remain nameless, has offered to account for this if we pay him a quarter. We refuse to humor him. So, sorry, we can't answer your question. It's irritating, we agree.

The Editor

Dear Editor,

How much do I have to pay to get published? That's how real writers do it, isn't it?

Hopeful in Hoboken

Dear Hopeful,

No, that's not how real writers do it. In general, if no editor is willing to pay you for your material, no reader is going to be willing to pay to read it. The way to get published is to write something good enough, and send it to someone who can buy it. Like us.

The Editor

Dear Editor,

I have just been contracted by aliens from a UFO. They are from Venus. They gave me an important message for all of mankind. I believe that because science fiction readers (and editors too!) are such imaginative people, they will be able to understand the complexities of the message. It runs 25,000 words. Will you print it in *Amazing*?

Yours sincerely,
Expectant Contactee

Dear Contactee,

Yes, but since science-fiction people are used to dealing with the way-out and imaginative, they have a much, much better idea of what is real and what is made up than you do.

The Editor

Dear Editor,

What about the Shaver Mystery? I believe my 25,000 word treatise will provide new insights into this matter. It's an old *Amazing* tradition, you know.

Yours,
Spelunker (formerly Contactee)

Dear Spelunker,

With the invention of the safety-razor in 1952, there ceased to be a mystery. Further, while we respect *Amazing's* traditions, some of them, we think, should remain buried.

The Editor

Dear Editor,

Do I have to query before sending in a short story? Should I send an outline or the whole manuscript?

Yours,
Promising New Author

Dear Promising,

Send in the whole story. No, you don't have to query first. We read unsolicited submissions. Make sure you send an adequate self-addressed, stamped envelope, in case the story is rejected.

Good luck!

The Editor

Dear Editor,

Why do editors always refer to themselves in the plural? Are they schizo?

Just Curious

Dear Just,

We haven't the slightest idea.

The Editor

Dear Readers,

The letter column will continue in a more serious fashion next issue, with real letters from you. So write to us. Tell us what you like about the magazine and what you don't. Which stories are your favorites? What would you like to see in *Amazing* in the future?

We encourage letters. We read them, and print some. It's an old *Amazing* tradition, you know.

Darrell Schweitzer





SEEDSHIP

by Jack Williamson

art: Karl Kofoed

Jack Williamson was first published in Amazing in our December 1928 issue, not counting a fan letter that appeared in a 1927 issue. Since then he has appeared in the magazine from time to time; he's also published over forty books, including such classic novels as The Legion of Space, Darker Than You Think, and The Humanoids. Recent works include The Queen of the Legion, Wall around a Star (written with Frederik Pohl), and Manseed, of which this story is a part.

Mr. Williamson writes: "The idea for Manseed was something new, at least to me, and entirely wonderful. Developing it cast the characters and shaped the plot and controlled everything. It let me feel that I was not exactly creating, but discovering form for the novel as well as the people in it. I hope it's as much fun to read as it was to write."

Seedship 21

The ship's computer broke into his happy dream of Megan Drake.

"Duty call, Defender!"

He hated the voice. Soundless, inhuman, yet edged with a mocking hint of hers.

"Ship in orbit around target planet. Your service now required."

He shut himself against the call, groping to recover his joy in the dream. They had been racing down the highest slope at Angel Fire. She had passed him, red scarf flying, her lean face aglow with cold and her skis singing on the snow, close enough to touch. The wind swept her laugh away, but he had seen the teasing glint in her greenish eyes before she bent to vanish in the swirl of flakes ahead.

Crouching lower, heart thudding, he raced to overtake her. She meant him to — he still felt drunk with the wonder of that, still astonished that she could be so different here, away from the Albuquerque lab and all the driving demands of the project.

Megan — week-ending with him!

He strove to hold the dream, but it had shattered on hard recollection. Megan Drake was dead. A million years ago. Lost forever, with the human Earth and all he had ever known, somewhere in the bleak light-years and the measureless millennia behind.

"Attention, Defender." The computer's quick and brittle voice stabbed him again. "You will now survey target planet to determine whether landing is forbidden."

He couldn't reply. The dream still possessed him, the human Megan still alive in his mind. He wanted her again. The proud spirit and the sleeping passion beneath her cool reserve and all the wonder of her that he had only begun to discover. The magic sweetness of her hair and the taste of her mouth. Her joyous devotion to him — but that had been only in the dream. The ache of waking was still too sharp for him to bear.

In the dream he had forgotten what he was.

Nothing human, but only a gadget. Half machine and half alive, a creation of computer science and genetic engineering, his mind — rather, his own controlling program — patched from bits of skill and know-how the Defender had been expected to require, his human recollections a haphazard mix picked up by lab accident.

Floating weightless in the dark birthcell, he explored himself again. The cold and hairless flesh, pliantly metallic. The throbbing umbilical, only slightly warmer, coiling out of darkness to his belly. Shivering, yet nerved with sudden hope, he reached to feel his crotch.

All he found was stiffly yielding metal, slick and cold and hairless. Nothing had grown while he slept. Still he had no reason to dream of any woman —

"Defender, alert!" The computer again, icily unfeeling. "Free oxygen detected on target planet. Interpreted as evidence of life evolving here.

Our master control program forbids planting on advanced planets. If we find native culture evolved to our own level or above, mission must be aborted. You will survey target planet for indications of advanced intelligence."

"Defender to Ship." Automatic words, spoken by the machine he was. "I will comply."

Fingers a-tingle as feeling came back, he searched the slick metallic wall of his narrow birthpod, found the seam where it closed. Squirming in the dark to reach the bulging opener, he hammered with his fist. Floating, waiting, he groped again for the source of that lost dream.

For it felt too real for a dream, and he thought it might lead him to more of himself. A mongrel half-thing, he yearned to be whole, hungered for humanity, longed to recover that lost instant of total happiness.

All his human fragments came from troubled men, trapped on a troubled planet, all in love with Megan — or at least itching for her. The project itself had been her only promise he remembered. A share in her eager hope for a new human start, a better human chance, on whatever worlds the seed might reach.

He wanted more. He wanted Megan.

Had any of them won her? Waiting for his dark cell to open, shrinking from the Defender's hard and bitter lot, he tried to follow the clue of the dream. Sifting again through those fragmentary bits of mind and feeling, he groped for any island of joy, any moment of untroubled love, any real recollection of skiing with Megan at Angel Fire.

He found another talk with her.

The day in the lab had been too long. Used to action, he had been forced to lie too still in the scanner, too cold and sick from the radioactives filtering into his brain, battered too hard by too many demands for all he knew of combat.

"It's all we offered." A glint of malice in her tone. "A way for you to fight again."

He hated the way, now that he knew what it was. Though in fact his bad knee didn't matter here. All the job took was lying passive while they pounded him with questions to get unconscious reactions that Rablon's computers could record.

Too many questions, most of them painful.

What conflicts had he seen? How had he planned for them? How had he trained? What forces had he commanded? Who had commanded him? What weapons did he know? Where had he used them? What engagements had been decisive? How had they been won? How defeated? How much had he been paid? How little? With whose funds? What laws had he broken? With what consequences? Had he ever looted? Killed civilians? Worked with terrorists? With the CIA? With any other such agency?

He had never liked looking back. There had been more blunders than victories, more pain than elation. Perhaps there were secret selves inside him that he didn't want to meet. The moment now had always been enough, and lure of tomorrow — so long as he was fit to face it.

Why did men kill? Why had he enjoyed it?

Megan's questions, most of them, asked with increasing shock and revulsion. She wanted to despise him. Yet, in spite of all her idealism, she had been fascinated by his dedication to that oldest and most absorbing human game, played for life or death. And she had fascinated him, not through anything intentional, but with the fierce emotion he could sense beneath her crisp control. Limping back from the shower after that hard session, he found her waiting for him in the lab.

"Buy you a drink?" He grinned wryly at her. "Something smoother than your radio cocktails."

"My turn." Her quick smile erased the ache in his knee. "With dinner. After all, it's Friday night."

She drove him to the Aztec Temple, a shabby-looking little place off Central where the Mexican food was hot and the margaritas smooth enough. They talked. She asked for more about the elephant poachers he had fought in Africa and the Izquierdista rebellion. He relished her unwilling admiration. Nerved with the drinks and her clean loveliness, he begged her to come with him back to Mexico.

"I'll rent a plane — the knee's well enough for that — and fly you down to Baja." He saw her start, eyes almost frightened. "Most of the crew will take the week end off," he urged her. "We'll be back Monday morning."

"Don —"

Her breath had caught. For a long moment she looked at him across her salted glass, a flush of tangled feelings on her face. For a moment she was about to yield, but then he saw her ripe lips tighten, perhaps with pity for him.

"Not that I've a lot left for anybody," he muttered. "And no harm intended. But — if I could love — I love you, Megan."

"I'm sorry, Don." Her fine head shook sharply and she leaned across the table, eyes very grave. "Terribly sorry. Because I — I like you, Don."

"You forgive the killing?"

"Maybe —" She flinched as if to a stab of pain. "Maybe that's why I like you. But —" Her eyes fell for an instant, then rose to meet his. "I'm a virgin, Don. Egan and my uncle used to say I ought to see a shrink, but I never did. Seldom ever thought about it, since the seedship project started. I've wondered if it somehow takes the place of sex."

"When it's finished —" She drew a long breath, and her hand reached for his. "Maybe —"

The long slit was widening. He saw the glint of stars outside, swept past

by the ship's slow spin, but still Megan haunted him. Still he longed to know who — which part of him — could have been with her at Angel Fire. Not Don Brink. Even if she kept that uncertain promise in time for the event to get into the ship's computer, Brink couldn't have been the skier. Not with the mortar splinter in his knee.

Who else? Shadowy jealousies woke to spur him. If Megan had really been a virgin, all five men wanting her, who had been lucky? Watching the creeping stars, he sifted again through those scrambled scraps of memory. Few were clearly linked to any name, none of the rest quite so vivid as Brink's.

Martin Rablon? The computer engineer, maybe hoping for Megan to replace his wife — though the glimpses of his faithless Jayna revealed little likeness. No idealist, born poor but bright, she had been plain Jane Jones when he met her. His student in beginning computer science, failing till she began to pay for her grades with what she did best. Torn between his science and his business interests and her witchery, Rablon had no time for sports; he had probably never learned to ski.

Ivan Tomislav, the genetics engineer?

Searching through random scraps of Tomislav, he found skis and poles and boots, but they lay gathering dust in a bedroom closet at the La Jolla bungalow. Tomislav was aging, overweight and on a diet. The gear had belonged to his dead son —

A burst of painful memory. Roger dead and Olga dying. Poor dear Olga, once fatter than he, skeletal and bedfast now, begging for the shots he couldn't deny, doomed by the same rare genetic-linked malignancy that had driven Roger to suicide when it was diagnosed in him. Olga dying because his genetic science had been too slow with the benign synthetic virus that might have repaired those fatal genes.

For an instant he was Tomislav, puffing off the plane at Albuquerque, a little troubled by the altitude and more by Olga's illness. Megan's voice calling his name, and his wistful admiration when he saw her. As straight and strong as Olga had been when they met at Columbia. If he had only found the right research track ten years before —

But genetic clocks didn't turn back, and the happy skier at Angel Fire had not been Tomislav.

Wardian, the airline pilot and ex-astronaut? More likely. Young enough, well-tanned and muscular, as tall as NASA allowed, he had an easy way with women. Angel Fire? He had known it most of his life. There with his Dad when he was a kid. Later with Debbie, teaching her to ski while she gave him more exciting lessons —

They were sitting in the lounge at the lab, drinking canned Coors while they waited for Ivan and his crew to run down a bug in the scanner.

"Megan?" Wardian gave him a startled grin. "Not for me. Though she

is a stunner. Could be, anyhow, if she ever lets anybody turn her on."

"I can't help dreaming —"

He shook his head and eased the aching knee.

"Your lay." Wardian lifted his beer with a half-ironic flourish. "If she ever lets you make her, which I don't expect. As for me, I like to look, but I've got two rules for women. Never let 'em marry you. And never touch a virgin."

If Wardian had kept that second rule, if Galen Ulver had been too old and frail for Angel Fire —

The slit had widened, and the ship's slow tumble let a sun-blade slash across him. No clue found, he gave up the search for that lost instant of perfect-seeming love. Perhaps it had really been a dream. He would probably never know.

Not that it could matter now, because all those unlucky men were gone to dust a million years ago, their world forever lost. Shivering a little in the cold birthcell, he tried to brush their haunting ghosts away. He was all of them, none of them, more than any of them. Their wispy relics random defects in the defender of the ship, hazards to his duty now.

The opening door looked wide enough at last. Coiling the warm umbilical on his arm to keep it free, he squeezed his way outside.

Black space and blazing metal.

He was blind for an instant, until his eyes adjusted to the savage sun. Magnetic feet clinging to the metal, he stood up to orient himself. The ship was still beneath him, alive again, still slowly tumbling, its gold-filmed skin crudely patched where he had tapped into the hydrocarbon feedstocks, his slender yellow life-cord still trailing back through the slit behind him.

Searching, he found the planet —

Elation lifted him. Here at last, their long-lost goal? The new world where the seed of man might put out fresh roots and thrive again — if they got it safely planted.

Close below and more than half in shadow, the planet was a magnificent crescent, huge even before his eyes went telescopic. Dazzling clouds wound the equator in a snaky line which would be the zone of tropical convergence. Blue-black ocean reached north and south from that to meet white-swirling storms.

He saw no land.

"Ship to Defender." The master computer. "Requesting data as you observe it."

"Observation in progress." Trying to forget Megan's haunting overtones in the quick synthetic voice, he heard his own soundless reply, itself

no more human. "Patterns of cloud reveal systems of air circulation which resemble Earth's, indicating strong Coriolis effect due to planet's rotation. Climatic environment should favor human survival, if we can land."

"We continue to monitor entire radiation spectrum," the computer said. "Sensor systems detect no evidence of life except atmospheric oxygen. You will search for possible touchdown site."

"I am searching."

He watched the planet's slow rotation as they spun on around it. The bright crescent spread. New storm patterns crept over the limb. Dark sea and shining cloud. He found no solid surface —

"Nobody knows."

In Megan's office at the lab, Wardian leaned to frown at the big device he called a stellarium. Just installed, it still had a hot-plastic scent. The stars were tiny lights on thin rods radiating from the brighter central light that stood for the sun. A lucite sheet through the sun marked what he called the galactic plane. Two half-hoops swung around it to show galactic longitude and latitude, and the computer-linked CRT on Megan's desk gave data on any star beneath their point of intersection.

Never data enough.

"Of course we hope for planets."

Wardian shrugged. Just in from hang-gliding off the Manzano slopes, he looked lean and dashing intrepid in a trimly tailored yellow jumpsuit, a little too certain of what he could do, a little too ironic about everything else.

What did Megan think of him?

"Theory says planets should exist." Wardian spoke only half to him, fine eyes still fixed on her. "Planets enough like Earth to give the seed a chance, perhaps around every normal star. We do have uncertain evidence of a few gas giants, but our instruments aren't good enough to show the worlds we're looking for."

"We're shooting at planets we can't even see?" He shook his head at Megan. "What sort of chance —"

"Please, Don." Chiding him, Megan seemed almost hurt. "We've got good things going for us."

Pity for her stabbed through his half-unwilling worship. Standing tall beside that glittering gadget, she was framed against the window, her lean vitality in bright contrast to the desert vista beyond. Bold enough to challenge mankind's mortality. Lovely enough for anything, if she ever cared to be. But far too idealistic. Squandering herself on the project, her life a needless sacrifice for a goal most of the world would laugh at.

"The odds are terrible." She nodded soberly. "Against any single seed. But we're going to scatter them by the hundreds — thousands if we can

— across a whole field of stars —”

“If the authorities ever let Galen test his fusion drive.” Wardian grinned wryly at her optimism. “If he can make it work when they do, and build the units cheap enough. If we have time to launch the ships before our own world blows up.”

“Problems.” She shrugged. “We’ll get them solved.” Her greenish eyes came back to him, turning graver. “You’re another problem, Don.”

“The problem is that you might do that a little too well.” Wardian looked quizzical. “You’ve alarmed Dr. Tomislav. He’s afraid your skills and your genes would turn the children of the ships into interstellar vandals, ravaging the Galaxy. Which isn’t what we want.”

He looked at Megan.

“We need you, Don,” she assured him. “Some of you, anyhow. The question is how much. I know how you love your old game of war, but modern weapons have made it suicidal. The new races have to be designed not to kill each other.”

“If you make them pacifists,” he said, “they won’t last long.”

“A thorny question.” A needle of fear stabbed through him, fear that he wouldn’t be wanted. “We’re still looking for the answer.”

She found him in the lounge at the lab, one morning not much later. Frowning at the program board, he was looking for his name. Again it wasn’t there. Depressed about it, he turned to meet her.

“Through with me?”

“No, Don.” He saw she wasn’t sure. “I hope not.”

“I’ve been waiting three days now.”

Waiting for another session in the scanner. He felt baffled and bored. Still too lame for much activity, he had tried to read the tattered magazines on the rack, dry technical journals on computers and astronautics and genetics. Tried to read a paperback novel, a war story written by a romantic fool who had never been in combat. Tried to plan what to do next, if Megan let him go.

“Let’s talk to Ben,” she was saying. “We took the problem to him.”

“Ben?”

“Ben Bannerjee.” He heard a special softness in her voice. “You haven’t met him, because he’s too frail for the scanner. But he’s the brain of Raven Foundation.”

He followed her out of the lounge.

“Ben knows you,” she said. “From editing your scanner pickups. Converted into audio, which he has learned to read. He says he wants to see you, because you’ve done so much that he could only dream about. You’ll admire him, Don, if you’ll give yourself a chance.”

He heard the admiration in her own voice.

“It’s Benjamin Franklin Bannerjee.” They were crossing the parking

lot, toward a building where Omega had fabricated weapon components. "A name he picked for himself, because he never knew his parents. Born deformed somewhere in India. He doesn't know the place or even his age. Maybe five or six years old when my uncle found him on a Calcutta street. In the hands of a one-eyed Fagin type who had him squatting there in rags and filth, playing chess against anybody.

"Winning every game.

"My uncle had never married. Or cared much for children, not even Egan and me. But he was taken with Ben from that first glimpse. Bought him from the thug that claimed him. Got him back to New York for medical care — nearly too late.

"He'll be a shock to you, Don."

She stopped on the walk outside the building.

"That's why I'm warning you. He does turn people off. His brains, I guess, as much as his looks. But I've known him since I was seven. And loved him as much as Uncle Luther did. So did Egan. Toward the end, I think he was Egan's only friend.

"Uncle Luther always trusted him. For business advice, and finally about the seedship. Egan's idea, but Uncle Luther never listened to Egan. Ben saw how to make it real. Without him, we wouldn't be here."

He followed her inside. A white-starched nurse made them put on surgical masks and wash their hands at a surgical sink before she let them into a windowless room where the overheated air had a stale incense odor that failed to cover a sharp antiseptic bite. He heard a queer screechy quavering and tried not to recoil when he saw Ben.

A child-sized thing in an odd-looking wheelchair.

A withered head; hairless, brown, and scarred. Its face narrow and dark and shapeless, a mask of long suffering, twitching strangely. The body too small for the head, grotesquely crumpled.

The nurse spoke and the quavering changed. The powered chair spun toward him. He saw a single fleshless arm, the only useful limb. Dark, pain-haunted eyes peered up at him. Uneasy before them, he looked back at Megan.

"Ben —" Her easy warmth seemed strange in the lab-like room. "Here's Don."

"Hi, Mr. Brink." That gnarled mask had tried to smile, and Ben's single spidery claw scuttled across a computer keypad. A hollow synthetic croak from a speaker on the stark white wall, the words set a shiver in him. "Thanks for coming in. Miss Zorrilla will find you a seat."

The nurse brought a seat and he sat uneasily before those disconcerting eyes, expecting to be grilled again about his life and his hopes and his ethics. Megan came to stand behind the wheelchair, one hand on Ben's shrunken shoulder, a tender-seeming smile behind her own white mask.

"Mr. Brink, I believe you play chess."

"Not often."

"Neither do I." The dreadful face seemed to grin. "Too many urgencies interfere. Have you time for a game?"

"Time's all I have."

Miss Zorrilla brought a board. Ben announced a two-minute limit, but that agile claw needed only seconds for a move. Though he tried to play a cautious game, in twenty moves he was beaten.

"Good game; Don." Those queerly brilliant eyes stabbed at him again. "I was asked for advice about you. I think we do need you in the defender."

"Thanks —" The word came out with more emotion than he wanted. "Thanks!"

"I'm glad," Megan whispered.

"I've talked to Marty and Ivan."

Ben looked up at her, yellow fingers poised, that tragic mask transformed with love.

"They agreed?"

"We worked out a compromise." The fingers were flashing again. "The ships may need defense. The new colonies may, till they can care for themselves. But we aren't launching conquistadores."

The haunted eyes came from Megan back to him.

"Marty's writing a new control program for the computers. A triple test, to protect any inhabited worlds the ships may reach. The first is technological, to turn them away from any planet that shows evidence of electronic communication or nuclear energy or space navigation. The second is economic and political, to protect any global social system. The third is cultural. It goes somewhat farther, intended to prevent the murder of any intelligent race or evolving culture. The program will kill the seed, even after landing, if any creatures simply say they don't want us there."

"You mean we can't fight — anything?"

"Our decision." Ben's skeletal head nodded unsteadily. "If you are challenged by anything intelligent, you will yield without resisting."

"Can't you —" That took his breath. "Can't you reconsider?"

"We did reconsider." The wheelchair was rolling away, and again the overhot room was filled with the audio chirps and squeaks and drones of the scanner recording. That electronic voice rang through it, inhumanly remote. "We've made the rules, Mr. Brink. The game's yours to play. We expect you to play it well —"

"But —"

"Thanks, Mr. Brink. Thanks for coming in."

The nurse waved them toward the door.

"Better than nothing, I guess." Unhappily, he followed Megan out. "But still a deadly handicap. If you build a suicide drive into the ships,

what sort of chance is left?"

"Chance enough." She paused to take off the mask, looking back toward Ben with what he thought was wistful sadness. "We aren't setting out to conquer the stars. Just to keep mankind alive. If just a single seed finds a place where it can grow, that's all we need — and maybe more than we've earned, if you look at human history."

"I can't guess what enemies we'll meet —"

"But I've begun to know you, Don." She gave him an odd half-smile.

"I think you can cope with any handicap —"

Land!

A broken coast beneath the belted clouds, creeping over the world's bright curve. Brighter than the sea and softly tinged with green — which must mean chlorophyll or something very like it. Trembling, he watched its slow roll toward him.

A bright line shone along the horizon. He watched it climb, widen, become an enormous mountain mass that towered out of the clouds. A dead volcano, dominating the continent — in some remote tectonic past, it must have built the continent. His eyes went telescopic to study the icy dazzle of its vast caldera and the glaciers on its snowy slopes.

"Defender," the computer was demanding, "what do you observe?"

"All we could ask for. A land-mass that reaches from the tropics nearly to the northward pole. Somewhere on it, we should find everything we need. If the program allows us to land—"

"Ship to Defender. We report all monitors recording. No negative input received. You will continue scanning for possible touchdown points."

Walking around the tumbling hull to follow the planet, he found the umbilical coiling to snare his knees. He pivoted back to get it free. Shuffling again to watch the rolling world below, he found a second continent.

Not quite so large, it stretched from the equatorial clouds far toward the other pole. Not quite so high, it carried no visible ice. Drier, a vast waste of red-brown desert below the belt of storms. Older, perhaps, built by an earlier tectonic spasm and now worn low.

Scattered between the two continents, he found new patches of broken cloud. Formed, he thought, where trade winds were lifted by island chains — who had been the donor, he wondered, of his meteorology? Wardian, maybe. Pilots had to know weather —

"Defender, we request data for possible landing."

"The northern continent looked more likely," he decided. "It should have wider climatic range. Perhaps richer resources. But we'll need a long study of it before we can select any touchdown —"

"Defender!"

Still emotionless, the computer voice had changed. It spoke faster, with stronger hints of Megan. He caught another fleeting image of her face, turned rigid now and wan, eyes fixed and empty.

"Monitors detect radiation. We are under scan by wide-spectrum beams."

"Where?"

He turned from the planet to search the space around them. The hot sun-disk, a little smaller and a little bluer, he thought, than the lost sun of Earth. Two of the planet's huge gas planets, darting into view as his vision adapted. Nothing else. Not even a moon.

"Source not identified —"

The computer voice caught, came suddenly faster.

"Source located! Alien spacecraft following on our own orbit, close behind and closing."

Still he saw nothing.

"Can we signal?"

"We are transmitting initial contact code on every frequency available. Our signals are ignored."

"If we're attacked, can we fight?"

"Negative. We are unarmed. Control program forbids armed combat with anybody."

"Then we'd better dodge —"

"Defender, attention! We detect missile approaching."

"Take evasive action —"

"Evasion impossible. Our rockets lack adequate acceleration —"

Something hit him.

Struck his chest and knocked him off the hull. Whirling into space, fumbling for anything, he found it anchored to his flesh. A heavy metal disk that felt slightly warm. He clawed to tear it off, but still it clung fast. The ship spun away from him, a bright golden toy, still linked by his trailing umbilical.

The alien craft went by. A flash of bright metal and blue jets blazing. Something dragged him after it. A cable, perhaps, to the disk on his chest? Groping, he found no cable. Spinning, helpless, he felt the umbilical tighten.

"Ship!" He tried to call. "Defender to Ship —"

Agony dazed him, and his voice was dead. The hot sun dimmed. He lost the alien craft. Feebly, he slapped at his belly. The umbilical was gone, torn away, his life itself cut off.

"Ship!" He tried again. "Calling Ship —"

Megan's white ghost-face flickered in his mind, fixed and stricken. Spinning into space, he got one glimpse of the tiny golden seedcraft. Dull now, as his vision went out. Already tiny with distance and gone in an instant.

"Ship to Defender." The voice was almost Megan's, burdened with a bleak despair no computer could express, swiftly fading. **"We report end of mission. In response to display of advanced technology, our master control program has cancelled all landing plans."**

"We can't give up —"

"Ship to Defender." A soundless murmur, dying. **"We must obey. You will not attempt to damage alien craft or its masters —"**

"But — somehow — can't we —"

His own voice had failed. Pain throbbed under the clutching hand on his belly, slowly easing. Dully searching, he failed to find the alien machine. The sun went out, and he slid into darkness.

Sunlight revived him.

Still groggy from shock and the pain in his belly, he fought for awareness and found the thing against the stars ahead. A space toy at first, flying farther ahead as the missile hauled him toward it. In a moment his perceptions shifted, to let it loom awesome and enormous.

Space craft or station, it made the seedship an inconsequential giant. Never meant for atmospheric flight, its fantastic masses were not streamlined anywhere. Half black shadow, they burned where the sun struck, darkly rust-red.

Groping dimly to know what it was, he saw a wide strip of brighter metal, a long hollow down the middle of it. Brighter, perhaps, because its walls had been a shield against radiation damage. Inky shadow filled two others that lay parallel. All were trimly tapered, as if to fit streamlined machines.

One of them his attacker? Probably not; in his fleeting glimpse of that, it had seemed far smaller. No matter. The thing's very presence here in orbit was enough to forbid the planet to them. With no fuel left to lift them toward another target, everything was over.

Ben Bannerjee's decision, and he knew he must accept it. After all, most of the seedcraft had been expected to die. A single cog in one machine, he shouldn't be upset about it. He had been engineered to obey the master program, not to feel emotion.

But —

In spite of himself, in spite of the program and his own gray despair, he found both golden hands grasping and wrenching at the missile on his chest. A thick metal disk, it was still stuck fast, still dragging him toward that monstrous starcraft.

Numb and clumsy, his fingers slipped off the clinging thing. He tried again, weaker still, and found awareness washing out. A little energy, he thought, had somehow come from the sunlight, but too little to replace the umbilical. His feeble struggle had drained too much.

Cursing silently, in a bitter fit of unengineered and useless human rage, he felt darkness strike. A dazing blow. Dimly, he knew he must have been hauled into the shadow of that great space-thing, but all he knew was the pain from his belly —

He ran to hide in the closet. They wouldn't find him there, because Sharon would want to look outside, in the shed or maybe behind the hedge. If anybody found him, he hoped it would be Penny. She had a nice smell, and she would scream and be glad. He liked Penny.

It was dark in the closet when he pulled the door shut. Something silky hung against his face. It had a smell he didn't like: mothballs and old perfume. His heart was thumping hard. He leaned against the door, listening.

Nothing. He waited. The house stayed very quiet, and he knew they were looking outside. The silky thing tickled his face. When he tried to push it away, it fell down over his head. The old perfume was too strong in it, and he couldn't breathe.

Gasping, he fought it off.

He heard them coming, their feet light and quick in the hall, which had no carpet. The door rattled. He heard Penny whisper, but she didn't open the door and scream. Something clicked, and they went away.

He waited, but they never came back. He hated the dark. The silky thing came down in his face again. The closet was too hot, and he couldn't stand the mothball smell. It was time to come out. He pushed at the door.

It wouldn't open. He knew then that Penny had locked it, and he didn't like her any more. He pounded on it with both fists and yelled for Sharon to let him out, but nobody came. It wasn't fair. They were cruel, but he couldn't fight them. Not even after he got out. Because they were girls.

His tummy felt bad and still the door wouldn't open. He yelled till he couldn't breathe, but nobody came. Nobody was fair. He lay on the floor. It rocked under him and the dust made him sneeze —

He woke in the dark, still on the floor. Something heavy had fallen on his chest, and he felt too weak to throw it off. Still he couldn't breathe, and the silent dark was suffocating. He tried to yell again.

He couldn't yell, because he had no voice. He couldn't see any walls, but he knew the place was bigger than the closet. A lot bigger. He wasn't breathing, but now he didn't need to breathe.

He was the defender.

He remembered the seedship and Bannerjee's idiotic command and that strange space machine. Dimly, he wondered if he had been hauled somewhere inside it, but his belly still ached and his brain wouldn't work. Without the umbilical, or even the feeble energy he had somehow drawn from sunlight, he was powerless, dying.

And something — something was coming.

It crept at him silently out of the dark. At first only a dark shadow-mass, but then he began to make out its shape. Something not much larger than he was, crawling on its belly. It moved like a cockroach, crawling and stopping, darting and stopping to watch him again.

It had no legs. No eyes that he could see. No jaws or insect antennae or anything else that he knew. It was low and wide and flat, with no projections anywhere, though it carried something on its back. Something disk-shaped, flat as it was.

The disk was shining. Dim at first, it grew abruptly brighter. The increasing light let him see the place where he was. The floor was circular and huge, a good hundred meters across. The ceiling was nearly too high to see, but he found a bundle of thick cylinders like the trunks of close-spaced trees climbing toward it from the center of the floor. Everything was metal, dark as if with time, and he knew he must be inside that immense space machine.

The moving thing was metal, too, but gold-colored, like the gold-filmed seedship and his own body. Darting and stopping, darting and stopping, it came on from toward the clustered tubes. His head hurt when he tried to understand it, but he knew it meant nothing good for him.

He wanted to fight it, but when he began groping for any weapon or possible strategy, he saw a wispy ghost of Megan's stricken face and heard a faint and soundless whisper. Radio, from the seedship? Or the voice of his own internal computer? Wondering, he knew no way to tell.

"Master Program to Defender. Mission is cancelled. Data input reveals positive evidence of high technology on target planet. Control commands therefore forbid attempt to seed it. Repeat. Master Program to Defender. Mission is cancelled. Beings of target planet are not to be attacked, on the surface or in space."

Despair crushed him down, cruel as the weight on his chest. The rule was foolish. Even his name was, if the program didn't allow him to defend the ship. Evolution had ordained the only real law, that every living thing must fight for the survival of itself and its kind. But he was not alive, not really, and Bannerjee's crazy edict was built into him. It had to be obeyed.

Yet he didn't want to die. Perhaps the rule had limits. He wasn't forbidden to escape from danger — if he could. Spurred by a surge of human desperation, he fought too little strength to get it off.

The flat yellow bug-shape had darted close. It stopped again as if to watch him. The thing it carried tipped on edge and swung one round face toward him, beaming brighter. Gratefully, he drank the radiation in. More than merely light, it warmed him, woke him wider, made him stronger.

Again he tugged and thrust. Still it held him flat, but not with gravity. His head and his struggling limbs had no weight. They were still in orbit,

and the force was something strange to him — not magnetic, certainly, because he had a sense of magnetism.

He felt the disk-thing scanning him. A whole spectrum of probing radiation. Infrared, furnace-hot. Ultraviolet. Radar. Even gamma rays. Never meant to help him, but still what he was starving for. Alive again with that new energy, he braced himself to cope.

What could the bug want from him?

If it was a defender of the planet, stationed here in orbit to challenge space invaders, it must have taken the seedship for an enemy. It had no way to know they hadn't come for conquest. If he could somehow explain the ship, perhaps it could yet be saved.

Those two great continents had looked empty enough, even to his telescopic vision. No visible cities, no patterns of roadways or farmland, no industrial smog, no hint of high technology. Somewhere, if only on an island, there might be room for the human seed to grow.

After all, his captors had clearly wanted him alive. If he could begin some intellectual contact, they might be persuaded to tolerate some small colony. The best of Earth's life and mind had come stored in the ship's computers. In due time, if the seed found root, such treasures might be bartered for added living space. Even, perhaps, for new science and culture.

He twisted himself to wave one hand, wondering if the bug would understand any gesture. As if in answer, the disk tipped farther toward him, its radiation changing to a quick-shifting pulse. He felt it throbbing out their own contact initiation signal, replayed precisely as the ship had sent it.

Intelligence! Quivering with elation, he listened to the soundless signal. A beep and a pause. Four beeps and a pause. Nine, sixteen, twenty-five, until his count of squares was two fifty-six. Then an empty box, sixteen pixels to the side. Simple patterns flashed inside it: triangle, square, trapezoid, a ragged circle. A bigger box, flickering with new detail. The signal came faster, faster, till he could make the pictures move.

The star, a brighter dot against the strange constellations he had seen. Its whole planetary system, swelling away. The four gas giants with all their moons in orbit. This inner planet, moonless, tiny at first but growing to fill the frame. The ship's outline. His own picture, complete with the linking umbilical.

Perhaps —

He lay naked again with his head in the scanner, enduring the cold sensors on his eyes and his throat, feeling faint from the stuff in his brain and trying not to shiver. Shivering caused noise in the pickups, but so did sweat; Rablon said they had to keep him cold.

Waiting for Megan's voice in the headphones, he couldn't help a pang

of guilt about his lust for her, or escape a secret shame being so jealous about the way she smiled at Wardian and Rablon and even poor old Brink. He had been celibate too long.

While Olga died.

Back in La Jolla, yearning for him, grieving for all they had lost. Creaking feebly every morning when he called, in that dreadful mockery of the singing voice he had loved so long, bravely saying she could wait for him to finish if he was really shaping seed to mankind across the stars. He knew how much she needed him.

He had promised to be there when she died. But he had promised his mind to Megan, promised all that Bannerjee required. He hated the chill and the stink and the sting of the needle and lying still so long, but the project did mean more than any single human being. If just one new world could be seeded with a better human breed —

The headphones began to click and squeak and howl, but not with any human voice. Images flickered in his head. Nothing he knew, they were stranger than Chinese ideograms or the structure of an unknown gene. Flashing, fading, they ran faster, faster, until he began to see pictures mingled with them. Symbols from math and chemistry, genetic structures that he knew, scrambled words. English. Greek and Latin roots, scientific German. The squeaks and howls became a clanging jangle, at last a voice.

“Attack Command to Unidentified.” Loud and slow, cold as sledges on an anvil. “Transmit recognition code.”

He knew no recognition code.

“Attack Command to Unidentified. State your place of origin.”

His place of birth was Schenectady, while his father was still there with the GE labs, but that failed to satisfy the voice.

“Attack Command to Unidentified. Describe creation by Master Builders.”

The Ibsen play, when Olga was in Little Theater.

“Attack Command to Unidentified. Establish submission to Total Control.”

His parents had got out of Europe barely ahead of the Nazis. He knew no other Total Control.

“Attack Command to Unidentified. Establish purpose of flight to —”

The voice became a rattle of clicks, and he saw a bright star creeping across a pattern of constellations he had never seen.

“Attack Command to Unidentified. Establish reasons for your arrival here.”

He was here in the lab because Olga had let him stay, because he believed in the project and trusted Bannerjee and loved Megan next to Olga, but that wasn't what the voice demanded.

“Attack Command to Unidentified. Establish reasons for your own

survival.”

He had work to do. The seedships to launch. Olga to care for, so long as she needed him. The Biowand researches to complete. His benign viruses to perfect, to save others from Olga’s hell.

“Attack Command to Unidentified —”

The bug meant to kill him.

The probing had stopped. That ruthless intrusion had left him battered and drained, but now his head was clear again, his brief elation gone. For the encounter had been no meeting of civilized minds, but rather a trial for his life on charges never stated.

Still he wasn’t sure what the creature was or what it wanted, but he hadn’t pleased it. He hadn’t known the recognition code. He had failed to identify himself as a creation of the Master Builders, whatever they were. Attack Command had not invited him, and it didn’t want him here.

Backing abruptly toward the clustered columns from which it must have come, the bug stopped again. The disk tipped to focus all its radiation on him. Savagely, it blazed.

A lethal blast, if he had been anything alive.

But he was only half alive. Built of synthetic molecules designed to endure all the hazards of open space for a million or a hundred million years, his body was more than half metallic, and energy was his food.

Feasting on that concentrated power, he twitched and shrank, flailed his arms and let them float, hoping to seem to be dying. Relaxing, eyes staring blankly, he felt the bug coming nearer, felt a final radiation burst.

When that ceased, he snatched at the heavy metal oval that held him down. It clung fast. With both hands he twisted, thrust, strained again. He felt vibration, felt the object heat and crack, saw smoke exploding.

And it was dead. Free, he surged upright. Once more magnetic, his feet gripped the deck. Clutching the hot metal mass for a weapon of his own, he swung to hurl it at the bug.

Something froze him.

“Master Program to Defender.” The computer voice, faintly and forlornly also Megan’s. “Repeat, mission cancelled. Advanced inhabitants are not to be attacked.”

The bug lay motionless, the disk now dim, but he sensed an alert hostility. Scanning his brain — or his own internal computer — it had learned too much about him. And still it meant to kill him. Knowing now that he was immune to radiation, it would look for something deadlier.

Trembling, he swung his missile higher. Why should he obey that insane injunction not to fight? With the ship and the mission in danger, he was the Defender. Trapped here, the umbilical broken, he was on his own. Surely, he would be allowed to defend himself —

“Master Program to Defender.” A fleeting image of Megan’s saddened

face. "Repeat. Control command forbids approach to planet or any action against its beings." The silent voice must be his own computer speaking; the ship's radio couldn't reach him here, inside these metal walls. "You will not attack."

He flinched from the mocking hints of Megan, because he knew they were only accidental artifacts picked up by that imperfect scanner. Perhaps a million years ago, on an Earth forever lost. Like all his own emotions, they were merely defects now in the seedship system.

Defeated, he tossed his useless weapon to the floor. It struck without sound; if the craft had ever held any sort of atmosphere, that must have leaked away long ago. Rebounding silently, the thing sailed weightlessly away. The bug darted back from where it had struck. The disk shone brighter for a moment, tipping to trace it, then went out.

Blind in the sudden dark, he sprang aside and stood crouched and wary, waiting for the bug. Surely, his computer would let him guard himself. His feet caught a faint vibration, perhaps when the dead missile struck the wall, but there was no attack.

Slowly, his eyes adjusted to the gloom. He saw his own limbs glowing, deeply and eerily red, saw light on a tiny patch of floor around him. Puzzled for an instant, he knew it must be infrared. Still hot from that blazing assault, his body was radiating energy his adapting vision could now detect. When it cooled, he would be blind again.

Disabled, too, when his chance recharge was gone.

Beyond that tiny glow, darkness walled him in. He couldn't find the bug. Had it fled, perhaps to find a better weapon? Or was it lurking somewhere near, watching, waiting till he ran down again? He had no way to know.

He felt driven to action, to use his dwindling store of strength and time — but what was there to do? Standing trapped in the overwhelming dark around his narrow crimson cave, he was ignorant, unarmed, forbidden to fight —

Trembling, he knotted his fists.

"Defender to Master Program." Defiantly, he addressed his own computer. "At least I can move. I can try to learn where I am and what has captured me. So long as I don't try to harm anything."

"Master Program to Defender." He hated that quick inflexible voice, even knowing it came from somewhere in himself. Hated the meaningless echo of Megan. "Repeat, mission cancelled. You will not resist. You will not interfere."

It had not forbidden him to move. Planless, empty-handed, watching for the bug, he struck out to find those clustered pillars. They loomed suddenly into his dim glow, not a dozen meters ahead. Most of them featureless pillars of some dull metal, but he found an oval opening in the thickest. Wide enough for the bug, it yawned black.

He clutched the rim and thrust himself inside to light it. A circular pit, nearly two meters across. Darkness filled it, above and below his faint glow. He hung there a moment, wary of the bug, but he saw no movement, felt no vibration.

Kicking off, he launched himself upward. Smooth metal walls flowed down around him. Another dark doorway. He caught the rim, pulled himself through. All he found was another vast floor, empty so far as he could see. Back in the pit, he pushed farther on.

A circle of pale light grew ahead, until at last he came out of the pit into a cavernous space that extended all around him, filled with great, ghostly shapes, shining dimly blue. Immense machines, all half transparent. Visible not with his faint glow, but somehow with their dim shine.

In a moment he understood. What he saw was gamma rays. The shapes were nuclear reactors, shining from old contamination. And lofty racks of fuel for them, burning dimly through massive shielding with the faint blaze of atomic decay. Black shadows beyond were enormous tanks that must have held mass for ion engines.

He clung there, dazed. He had known the thing had to be an orbital spacecraft. These engines were enough like those of the seedship to let him guess their function, but staggeringly larger. With such powerful nuclear propulsion, the craft had to be interstellar.

Had it brought space invaders? Under Attack Command? Could it have been a bigger sort of seedship? Sent to plant its makers here? The Master Builders? Shivering, he tried to imagine what kind of creatures they had been. And what they had done.

Nothing moved around him now. Nothing except the dancing atoms, and even their radiance was faint. These mighty engines had been cooling for ages he could only guess, certainly many thousand years. The invaders — if the great craft had really brought invasion — would be rulers of the planet now.

He dropped back into the pit, and his orientation spun. The engine room became the bottom of it. Giddy from the shift, he kicked off into the dark. Already his body-glow was fading, the darkness closing in, and he caromed clumsily off the dim-lit wall.

His mind was dimming, too. A dark doorway slid into view, strange until he remembered that empty space and the one above it where he had first found himself. Holds, he told himself, if this was a ship. Groggily, he wondered what they had stored.

Weapons, perhaps, for the conquest of the planet? Colonists to claim it? Tools to terraform it? Machines, supplies, libraries — everything to plant some alien race and culture as the builders of the seedship had hoped to plant humanity?

Perhaps. He saw no way to tell. His imagination began piling up nightmare things still crouching there beyond his dying body-glow.

Shivering, he shrank back into the shaft and climbed until he saw light again.

Light stronger than his own. He gripped the rim of the door through which it came and lurched out of the shaft into another immense compartment, dimly lit from six high openings spaced around it. The tube, with its cluster of surrounding columns, towered behind him into the dark.

Swaying unsteadily, the pull of his feet growing weaker, he stumbled across another vast floor and into the brightest opening. A metal tunnel, many meters long, it brought him into increasing light and at last outside the craft, to a dazzling view of open space and the sun. He clung to the lip, drinking hot energy in.

The tunnel opened into the bottom of a long metal canyon — one of the hollows he had seen from space. Berths for smaller spacecraft, yet themselves immense, perhaps two hundred meters long. Landing craft, perhaps, which had carried the invaders down to the planet?

The canyon walls had once been bright, he thought, but they were scar-pocked and red-stained now from long exposure to micrometeors and the solar wind. Above him and below, he found massive fittings that must have secured the landers.

If that was what they had been.

Looking for some more certain evidence, he pulled himself back into the tunnel. The strong sunlight was food he hungered for, but he had no time now to let it feed him. Not until he could learn more and feel safer from the bug.

One by one, he followed the other tunnels out. The next brought him back into life-renewing sunlight. Two opened on inky midnight and the Milky Way. The last let him see the planet's blazing crescent. Too sad to move, he let his eyes linger on it.

His vision adapted to let him see wreathing spirals of cloud and a greenish hint of land. With better luck, it might have grown the new human tree. But the seed of man had come too late. If their little ship had not been hit by that micrometeor, if they had got here ahead —

He pulled himself away, sick with defeat and his own predicament. The Defender had not been engineered for vain despair, but not for fighting either. Even if they had landed first, he might still have been forbidden to battle the invaders. Certainly, the new human colony would have been ill-prepared to meet attack from space.

Hating that bleak mood, he tried to shake it off. The Defender had been designed for action, with emotion only in the way. Even with any hopeful action banned, he felt driven to move on. Clumsily reeling, he stumbled back into the central shaft, kicked himself upward.

Dull metal slid by him, and two black doorways. Another circle of light appeared and grew ahead. He emerged at last on another deck. Immense

and circular, it reached out beyond the range of his dim body-glow, all around him and above.

Here at the top of the shaft, he thought this should be the control room. Peering around him for evidence of that, for astrogation gear or traces of the vanished crew, he found dark metal masses standing motionless in rows along six narrow avenues running back into the gloom for a small clear space around the pit.

Odd-shaped objects taller than he was. Machines, perhaps, eternal as the seedship, designed maybe by the Master Builders on whatever faroff world they had ruled — designed to operate the craft for Attack Command? Carefully, making the most of his dwindling energy, he shuffled to inspect them.

Light flashed behind him.

Spinning to face it, he met the bug.

Most of those looming, box-like masses were time-tarnished metal, nearly black, but one was warm enough to glow like his own body, dully infrared. Taller than the rest, it stood far-off, at the end of a shadowy alley. If the others were a robot crew, shut down now, he thought this one might be the commander, still in operation. The bug had come from somewhere behind it. Gliding silently and fast, the thing stopped in the middle of that gloomy avenue, twenty meters away.

His own heat-energy had cooled too long. Swinging groggily to meet the bug, he found himself floating off the deck and had to make a desperate stab with one magnetic toe to get back. Unarmed and bewildered, too far gone even to plan any action, he could only hang there, waiting.

The bug lay still, the disk on its golden carapace turning slowly bright enough to show the wall of a thick-ribbed dome that curved up beyond the red-glowing block. The great craft's nose, it arched high above him. Scanning it for any weapon the master program might let him use, for any hopeful chance, he found only ancient metal.

He saw the disk tipping toward him. The light of it focused to fix him with an unsteady beam. He yearned for another burst of its restoring radiation, but the swift-pulsed flicker stayed too faint to help him. A rattle of static. A soundless howl. A harsh, inhuman voice.

"Attack Command to Unidentified."

"Guest —" he tried to say. "Guest to Attack —"

"Attention, Unidentified." It cut him off. "You establish no authority for existence here. Attack Command requires your removal —"

"Removal not required!"

Trying to shout, he saw no hint that the bug received anything. It lay inert, looking as lifeless as any metal ingot. The flickering signal had

ceased, but the gray-glowing face of the disk was still fixed upon him like a solitary eye, alertly hostile.

"Guest to Attack Command." He tried again. "We do not resist. Our own commands protect you. All we seek is to survive —"

He saw the second bug.

Darting from somewhere about that red-glowing tower, it stopped close behind the first. They looked almost identical, featureless flat masses, but the second carried something else on its sleek yellow shell.

Something cylindrical, pointing at him.

He gathered his last energy and tried to sharpen his fading senses to study it. A dark hollow tube. A missile launcher — with a dark projectile already emerging! Desperately, he accelerated. Swaying aside, he reached fast enough but very gingerly to grasp it, let the momentum of its heavy little mass spin his body until its direction was reversed.

"Master Program to Defender!" The warning rang in his dimming mind, edged again with that mocking trace of Megan. "Advanced beings are not to be attacked —"

Obediently, as it left his fingers, he turned it slightly upward to let it miss the bugs. Before his vision went out, he saw that it would strike that red-glowing sentinel.

"Defender! You will not injure any being —"

The computer voice was fading, but its commands no longer mattered. All awareness dying, he was floating off the deck —

The blast had thrown him off the truck. He lay in foul-scummed mud, blood in his mouth, cold rain drumming on his back. A reek of spilled gasoline. Too near. He fought for breath, fought to drag himself farther, slid back into the muck.

A second soft explosion. A gentle roaring, louder than the rain. He heard the driver's strangled prayer to the mother of God, heard Prieto screaming. Poor devils, but nothing he can do. Howls and hoarse curses. Three quick shots. Then only the roar of the fire, till the wet weeds on the bank above him began to hiss and crackle.

Heat, increasing. The rank stink of the charred weeds and bitter whiff of burning hair and flesh. Cold rain trickling. Salt sweat biting where the hide had been scraped off his hands and cheek. He needed to lie there longer, to get his breath and clear his throbbing head.

But the ammo —

Got to get farther while I can. Head up, and never mind the giddiness. Fight the muck and breathe the stink. Grab that bush. Claw up the bank. Slide back and try again —

A hard concussion. The ammo, too soon. Duck and run. Christ, my knee — Damn thing numb, and then the crunching pain. No good for anything. Down in the mud again on hands and the other knee, dragging

the leg, scrambling for cover in the jungle.

One royal hell of a fix for an old pro at the game, but I'm not done for. Yet. Not if I can make it back to the wreck of the chopper and work the radio —

He was floating —

Somewhere in the dark. In the hospital tent, he thought at first. Under ether, maybe; he felt no pain, not even in his knee. Butch and Mascarenas must have come back with the other chopper to pick him up. But where were all the jungle croaks and chirps and shrieks? Where was anybody? Trying to turn in the bed, to see where he was, he found no bed. Only empty darkness all around him.

He was actually floating, his body turning slowly in the air — but here of course there was no air. He saw faint light and then the bugs, drifting above him under the black-ribbed vault.

Killed?

Watching their slow tumble, he saw no hint of life or action. Two odd-shaped slabs of dull-gold metal, they had no visible limbs or organs of sense, no wheels or tracks or anything else projecting. Even the shining disk and the missile launcher were gone.

Helpless, disabled and adrift in that frigid gloom, he clung to his dulled awareness and waited for some new attack. None came, and he wondered dimly why. If the great spacecraft had been left in orbit to defend the planet, why had it fought him so feebly? Perhaps, he thought, those missing landers had carried all its crew away, leaving only the robots aboard. And they, perhaps, after thousands of years, were running down.

His own rundown body kept very slowly spinning, like a tiny world in space. The two dead bugs went by again, like companion planets. The black vault climbed again above him, ominous sky with a pale moon in it. The moon was the disk. Floating near him, it was turning to light the deck beneath. When his own rotation let him see it, he found the shaft through which he had come, the radiating alleys of identical block-shapes around it, the taller thing the deflected missile had hit, now no longer glowing.

Dead!

"Master Program to Defender." That cold internal reprimand shattered his momentary triumph. "You are defective. You have malfunctioned. You have killed advanced inhabitants —"

"The missile was their own." Stubbornly, he defended his rebel self. "They fired it themselves, inside their own craft. They should have known it had to hit something."

"The being it struck was killed." The sternly brittle voice still held a hint of Megan, Megan sounding hurt. "A being of advanced intelligence."

"If it was a being —"

The nearer bug was swimming back into view. Not quite floating, it

was falling, as he himself was, drawn gently down toward the starcraft's center of mass. He saw that it would pass close enough for his foot to reach it.

Nerved with a sudden hope, he twisted to find the drifting disk. It at least was still somehow alive, still luminous with energy he needed. Eagerly, he measured mass and distance and velocity. When the bug was near enough, he nudged it with one weak toe.

A feeble nudge, but enough to send him gently toward the disk. If not exactly toward it, maybe close enough. He waited, judged its motion, reached again. His fingers touched it, turned feebly magnetic, drew it to him.

Basking in its power, he wished it had been stronger — and wondered if his touch had turned it brighter. As that dead block-shape swam closer, he swung the disk to find the spot where the missile had struck.

A jagged hole blown in the dark metal case. Coiling cables beneath, and thin shelves crowded with close-spaced rows of glittering crystals. Oddly shaped and strange enough, yet arrayed like Rablon's supercubes; he knew the shelves must be circuit boards.

"Defender to Ship!" Triumph surging high, he forgot that he was talking to himself. "The thing the missile hit was no live being. It's a computer. On all the craft, I've found no sign of life. No atmosphere, no quarters or stores for any living crew.

"Which means we could try a landing —"

"Master Program to Defender." Megan's sad image quivered and vanished in his mind, a ghost he would never escape. "Repeat: mission cancelled. Encounter with advanced orbital craft is itself adequate evidence of highly evolved technology here."

"But it didn't evolve here. The nuclear drives — everything about the craft says it's interstellar. It brought invaders here from another star. Sent out by something its computers called the Master Builders, operating under what they called Attack Command."

"Master Program to Defender." He hated its merciless insistence. "You found empty housings where their landing craft were carried. Your report implies that they reached the planet. If high technology exists there now, from whatever origin, it is forbidden to us."

"We've scanned the planet," he protested. "We got no data indicating any sort of technology there. Nothing electronic. No visible signs of advanced intelligence. Perhaps the things that tried to land were robots too. Maybe run down by now. Which means we aren't stopped yet —

"If I can get back where I belong!"

Hugged against his belly, the disk gave him a little life. He surveyed the deck as he fell closer, measured his way to the dark central pit. The shattered shell of the dead robot commander rose to meet him, and he thrust it aside with one bare foot.

Deflected, he fell back into the shaft. Its dark walls drifted slowly up, until a gray gleam struck through an oval door and he pulled himself out into the cold twilight that filtered through the tunnels from those empty berths.

Carefully, he launched himself out of the tube through the gloom toward the brightest tunnel mouth. Here, near the center of mass, his body flew true. He came out at last into the bottom of the hollow where a long landing craft had lain.



Into healing sunlight.

Anchored to the meteor-scarred metal at the tunnel's lip, he drank it in. Slowly, the great craft rolled. The sun was gone too soon beyond the rim of the cavity, but it would be back. He watched the marching stars until the planet rose above the other rim.

Splendid and immense, now near the full, it looked close enough to touch. He traced the snaky rain-dazzle of wind-convergence around the equator, searched the blue-black zones of tropical ocean, found the cloud-piled archipelago and then the two great continents.

Red flecks of desert. White glints of ice. Wider green reaches half-veiled with cloud. Senses keener now, vision turning telescopic, he swept the visible land again and still found no hint of intelligent engineering. Searching the energy spectrum, he picked up only the rustling static of

lightning in the storms. No evidence, he thought, that any invaders had ever landed.

"Defender to Ship," he called into space. "Hostile action ended. No evidence of advanced life now existing here in orbit or on the planet. Mission can continue —"

"Ship to Defender." The answer came instantly, bright with Megan's gladness. Her smile flashed across his mind, so lovely that old agonies work to throb again. "Homing on your signal."

He clung where he was, waiting for the ship and its haunting ghost of the woman he had loved — that they had loved, all those ghosts that haunted him. The good sun returned. Drinking in its golden wine, he pushed those poignant pains aside.

Chance wisps of a world dead forever in the black abyss behind them, they would never really matter. Why should he care whether Don Brink had ever gone to war again, or who had won Megan Drake? He was the defender, with this new world ahead, a fallow field so far as he could tell, waiting for him to plant and tend the human seed.

THE HUNTER: 20,000 A.D.

His is the body laid to rest in grave-site West
Whose whitening bones are built of disassembled suns
A deformed hunter — great Orion, that fearful strider
Into stony seas at dawn
Headless
Armless
He follows an almost human fate
Through winter-eras of silence, passing decrepit
Now, a Beggar-god above their vacant cities
A seeker of only new vacua
In these skies of falling engineering
He is going with them to a joyless end
The leprous fires
Of his starry silhouette are as the last
Of human signs departing, in slow
Dispersal into space
& nameless populations
That knew his shape too are like particles of ice
Borne away on the bitter wind

— Andrew Joron

Seedship 47

FOLIA'S STORY: THE ARMIGER'S DAUGHTER

by Gene Wolfe
art: Stephen Fabian



Severian, the hero of The Citadel of the Autarch, is a patient in a hospital in which most of the beds are occupied by wounded soldiers. One of these is a woman huzzar named Foila. When Melito and Hallvard, two other patients, quarrel over her, she proposes a story-telling contest to be judged by Severian. Hallvard tells a true story of his home islands in the icy south, and Melito recounts an animal fable. A wounded Ascian prisoner asks to enter and offers a moral tale from Ascia. Foila cautions Severian not to judge yet, and what she says after that comprises this story.

Gene Wolfe's four-volume, picaresque novel of the distant future, The Book of the New Sun, consists of The Shadow of the Torturer, The Claw of the Conciliator, The Sword of the Lictor, and the volume from which this story is taken, The Citadel of the Autarch.

"Hallvard and Melito and even the Ascian have had their chances. Don't you think I'm entitled to one too? Even a man who courts a maid thinking he has no rivals has one, and that one is herself. She may give herself to him, but she may also choose to keep herself for herself. He has to convince her that she will be happier with him than by herself, and though men convince maids of that often, it isn't often true. In this competition I will make my own entry, and win myself for myself if I can. If I marry for tales, should I marry someone who's a worse teller of them than I am myself?

"Each of the men has told a story of his own country. I will do the same. My land is the land of the far horizons, of the wide sky. It is the land of grass and wind and galloping hoofs. In summer the wind can be as hot as the breath of an oven, and when the pampas take fire, the line of smoke stretches a hundred leagues and the lions ride our cattle to escape it, looking like devils. The men of my country are brave as bulls and the women are fierce as hawks.

"When my grandmother was young, there was a villa in my country so remote that no one ever came there. It belonged to an armiger, a feudatory of the Liege of Pascua. The lands were rich, and it was a fine house, though the roof beams had been dragged by oxen all one summer to get them to the site. The walls were of earth, as the walls of all the houses in my country are, and they were three paces thick. People who live in woodlands scoff at such walls, but they are cool and make a fine appearance whitewashed and will not burn. There was a tower and a wide banquet hall, and a contrivance of ropes and wheels and buckets by which two merychips, walking in a circle, watered the garden on the roof.

"The armiger was a gallant man and his wife a lovely woman, but of all their children only one lived beyond the first year. She was tall, brown as leather yet smooth as oil, with hair the color of the palest wine and eyes dark as thunderheads. Still, the villa where they dwelt was so remote that no one knew and no one came to seek her. Often she rode all day alone, hunting with her peregrine or dashing after her spotted hunting cats when they had started an antelope. Often too she sat alone in her bed-chamber all the day, hearing the song of her lark in its cage and turning the pages of old books her mother had carried from her own home.

"At last her father determined that she must wed, for she was near the twentieth year, after which few would want her. Then he sent his servants everywhere for three hundred leagues around, crying her beauty and promising that on his death her husband should hold all that was his. Many fine riders came, with silver-mounted saddles and coral on the pommels of their swords. He entertained them all, and his daughter, with her hair in a man's hat and a long knife in a man's sash, mingled with

them, feigning to be one of them, so that she might hear who boasted of many women and see who stole when he thought himself unobserved. Each night she went to her father and told him their names, and when she had gone he called them to him and told them of the stakes where no one goes, where men bound in rawhide die in the sun; and the next morning they saddled their mounts and rode away.

"Soon there remained but three. Then the armiger's daughter could go among them no more, for with so few she feared they would surely know her. She went to her bedchamber and let down her hair and brushed it, and took off her hunting clothes and bathed in scented water. She put rings on her fingers and bracelets on her arms and wide hoops of gold in her ears, and on her head that thin circlet of fine gold that an armiger's daughter is entitled to wear. In short, she did all she knew to make herself beautiful, and because her heart was brave, perhaps there was no maid anywhere more beautiful than she.

"When she was dressed as she wished, she sent her servant to call her father and the three suitors to her. 'Now behold me,' she said. 'You see a ring of gold about my brow, and smaller rings suspended from my ears. The arms that will embrace one of you are themselves embraced by rings smaller still, and rings yet smaller are on my fingers. My chest of jewels lies open before you, and there are no more rings to be found in it; but there is another ring still in this room — a ring I do not wear. Can one of you discover it and bring it to me?'

"The three suitors looked up and down, behind the arras and beneath the bed. At last the youngest took the lark's cage from its hook and carried it to the armiger's daughter; and there, about the lark's right leg, was a tiny ring of gold. 'Now hear me,' she said. 'My husband shall be the man who shows me this little brown bird again.'

"And with that she opened the cage and thrust in her hand, then carrying the lark upon her finger took it to the window and tossed it in the air. For a moment the three suitors saw the gold ring glint in the sun. The lark rose until it was no more than a dot against the sky.

"Then the suitors rushed down the stair and out the door, calling for their mounts, the swift-footed friends that had carried them already so many leagues across the empty pampas. Their silver-mounted saddles they threw upon their backs, and in less than a moment all three were gone from the sight of the armiger and the armiger's daughter, and from each other's as well, for one rode north toward the jungles, and one east toward the mountains, and the youngest west toward the restless sea.

"When he who went north had ridden for some days, he came to a river too swift for swimming and rode along its bank, ever harkening to the songs of the birds who dwelt there, until he reached a ford. In that ford a rider in brown sat a brown destrier. His face was masked with a brown neck-cloth, his cloak, his hat, and all his clothing were of brown, and

about the ankle of his brown right boot was a ring of gold.

"'Who are you?' called the suitor.

The figure in brown answered not a word.

"'There was among us at the armiger's house a certain young man who vanished on the day before the last day,' said the suitor, 'and I think that you are he. In some way you have learned of my quest, and now you seek to prevent me. Well, stand clear of my road, or die where you stand.'

"And with that he drew sword and spurred his destrier into the water. For some time they fought as the men of my country fight, with the sword in the right hand and the long knife in the left, for the suitor was strong and brave, and the rider in brown was quick and blade-crafty. But at last the latter fell, and his blood stained the water.

"'I leave you your mount,' the suitor called, 'if your strength is sufficient to get you into the saddle again. For I am a merciful man.' And he rode away.

"When he who had ridden toward the mountains had ridden for some days also, he came to such a bridge as the mountain people build, a narrow affair of rope and bamboo, stretched across a chasm like the web of a spider. No man but a fool attempts to ride across such a contrivance, and so he dismounted and led his mount by the reins.

"When he began to cross it seemed to him that the bridge was all empty before him, but he had not come a quarter of the way when a figure appeared in the center. In form it was much like a man, but it was all of brown save for one flash of white, and it seemed to fold brown wings about itself. When the second suitor was closer still he saw that it wore a ring of gold about the ankle of one boot, and the brown wings now seemed no more than a cloak of that color.

"Then he traced a Sign in the air before him to protect him from those spirits that have forgotten their creator, and he called, 'Who are you? Name yourself!'

"'You see me,' the figure answered him. 'Name me true, and your wish is my wish.'

"'You are the spirit of the lark sent forth by the armiger's daughter,' said the second suitor. 'Your form you may change, but the ring marks you.'

"At that, the figure in brown drew sword and presented it hilt foremost to the second suitor. 'You have named me rightly,' it said. 'What would you have me do?'

"'Return with me to the armiger's house,' said the suitor, 'so that I may show you to the armiger's daughter and so win her.'

"'I will return with you gladly, if that is what you wish,' said the figure in brown. 'But I warn you now that if she sees me, she will not see in me what you see.'

“ ‘Nevertheless, come with me,’ answered the suitor, for he did not know what else to say.

“On such a bridge as the mountain people build, a man may turn about without much difficulty, but a four-legged beast finds it nearly impossible to do so. Therefore, they were forced to continue to the farther side in order that the second suitor might face his mount toward the armiger’s house once more. ‘How tedious this is,’ he thought as he walked the great catenary of the bridge, ‘and yet, how difficult and dangerous. Cannot that be used to my benefit?’ At last he called to the figure in brown, ‘I must walk this bridge, and then walk it again. But must you do so as well? Why don’t you fly to the other side and wait there for me?’

“At that, the figure in brown laughed, a wondrous trilling. ‘Did you not see that one of my wings is bandaged? I fluttered too near one of your rivals, and he slashed at me with his sword.’

“ ‘Then you cannot fly far?’ asked the second suitor.

“ ‘No indeed. As you approached this bridge I was perched on the brown walkway resting, and when I heard your tread I had scarcely strength to flutter up.’

“ ‘I see,’ said the second suitor, and no more. But to himself he thought: ‘If I were to cut this bridge, the lark would be forced to take bird-form again — yet it could not fly far, and I should surely kill it. Then I could carry it back, and the armiger’s daughter would know it.’

“When they reached the farther side, he patted the neck of his mount and turned him about, thinking that it would die, but that the best such animal was a small price to set against the ownership of great herds. ‘Follow us,’ he said to the figure in brown, and led his mount onto the bridge again, so that over that windy and aching chasm he went first, and the destrier behind him, and the figure in brown last of all. ‘The beast will rear as the bridge falls,’ he thought, ‘and the spirit of the lark will not be able to dash past, so it must resume its bird shape or perish.’ His plans, you see, were themselves shaped by the beliefs of my land, where those who set store in shape-changers will tell you that like thoughts they will not change once they have been made prisoner.

“Down the long curve of the bridge again walked the three, and up the side from which the second suitor had come, and as soon as he set foot on the rock, he drew his sword, sharp as his labor could make it. Two handrails of rope the bridge had, and two cables of hemp to support the roadway. He ought to have cut those first, but he wasted a moment on the handrails, and the figure in brown sprang from behind into the destrier’s saddle, drove spur to its flanks, and rode him down. Thus he died under the hoofs of his own mount.

“When the youngest suitor, who had gone toward the sea, had ridden some days as well, he reached its marge. There on the beach beside the

unquiet sea he met someone cloaked in brown, with a brown hat, and a brown cloth across nose and mouth, and a gold ring about the ankle of a brown boot.

"'You see me,' the person in brown called. 'Name me true, and your wish shall be my wish.'

"'You are an angel,' replied the youngest suitor, 'sent to guide me to the lark I seek.'

"At that the brown angel drew a sword and presented it, hilt foremost, to the youngest suitor, saying, 'You have named me rightly. What would you have me do?'

"'Never will I attempt to thwart the will of the Liege of Angels,' answered the youngest suitor. 'Since you are sent to guide me to the lark, my only wish is that you shall do so.'

"'And so I shall,' said the angel. 'But would you go by the shortest road? Or the best?'

"At that the youngest suitor thought to himself, 'Here surely is some trick. Ever the empyrean powers rebuke the impatience of men, which they, being immortal, can easily afford to do. Doubtless the shortest way lies through the horrors of caverns underground, or something like.' Therefore he answered the angel, 'By the best. Would not it dishonor her whom I shall wed to travel any other?'

"'Some say one thing and some another,' replied the angel. 'Now let me mount up behind you. Not far from here there is a goodly port, and there I have just sold two destriers as good as yours or better. We shall sell yours as well, and the gold ring that circles my boot.'

"In the port they did as the angel had indicated, and with their money purchased a ship, not large but swift and sound, and hired three knowing seamen to work her.

"On the third day out from port, the youngest suitor had such a dream by night as young men have. When he woke he touched the pillow near his head and found it warm, and when he lay down to sleep again, he winded some delicate perfume — the odor, it might have been, of the flowering grasses the women of my land dry in spring to braid in their hair.

"An isle they reached where no men come, and the youngest suitor went ashore to search for the lark. He found it not, but at the dying of the day stripped off his garments to cool himself in the surging sea. There, when the stars had brightened, another joined him. Together they swam, and together lay telling tales on the beach.

"One day while they were peering over the prow of their ship for another (for they traded at times, and at times fought also) a great gust of wind came and the angel's hat was blown into the all-devouring sea, and soon the brown cloth that had covered her face went to join it.

"At last they grew weary of the unresting sea and thought of my land,

where the lions ride our cattle in autumn when the grass burns, and the men are brave as bulls and the women fierce as hawks. Their ship they had called the *Lark*, and now the *Lark* flew across blue waters, each morn impaling the red sun upon her bowsprit. In the port where they had bought her they sold her, and received three times the price, for she was become a famous vessel, renowned in song and story; and indeed, all who came to the port wondered at how small she was, a trim, brown craft hardly a score of paces from stem to rudder post. Their loot they sold also, and the goods they had gained by trading. The people of my land keep the best destriers they breed for themselves, but it is to this port that they bring the best of those they sell, and there the youngest suitor and the angel bought good mounts and filled their saddlebags with gems and gold, and set out for the armiger's house, that is so remote that no one ever comes there.

"Many a scrape did they have upon the way, and many a time bloody the swords that had been washed so often in the cleansing sea and wiped on sailcloth or sand. Yet at last come they did. There the angel was welcomed by the armiger, shouting, and by his wife, weeping, and by all the servants, talking. And there she doffed her brown clothing and became the armiger's daughter of old once more.

"A great wedding was planned. In my land such things take many days, for there are roasting pits to be dug anew, and cattle to be slaughtered, and messengers who must ride for days to fetch guests who must ride for days also. On the third day, as they waited, the armiger's daughter sent her servant to the youngest suitor, saying, 'My mistress will not hunt today. Rather, she invites you to her bedchamber, to talk of times past upon sea and land.'

"The youngest suitor dressed himself in the finest of the clothes he had bought when they had returned to port, and soon was at the door of the armiger's daughter.

"He found her sitting on a window seat, turning the pages of one of the old books her mother had carried from her own home and listening to the singing of a lark in a cage. To that cage he went, and saw that the lark had a ring of gold about one leg. Then he looked at the armiger's daughter, wondering.

" 'Did the angel you met upon the strand not promise you should be guided to this lark?' she said. 'And by the best road? Each morning I open his cage and cast him out upon the wind to exercise his wings. Soon he returns to it again, where there is food for him, clean water, and safety.'

"Some say the wedding of the youngest suitor and the armiger's daughter was the finest ever seen in my land."

AMAZING STORY

by Jack Williamson

art: Jack Gaughan



Amazing Stories was born in 1926. Waiting for it, I was another naive farm kid, living with my folks on an unproductive sandhill homestead in Eastern New Mexico. What I didn't know filled most of the books ever written. I turned eighteen that spring, with only six years of school behind me and vast uncertainties ahead.

In the world outside, the world I didn't know, history was happening, technology advancing, lifestyles changing. In 1922 the "night club" had been invented, an early response to prohibition. Twelve people died that year in Red Hook, Brooklyn, from drinking wood alcohol. Henry Ford announced that he would fire any man caught with "the odor of beer, wine, or liquor on his breath." Daily radio news broadcasts began. The Lincoln Memorial was opened. Alexis Carrel discovered that white blood corpuscles, leucocytes, fight infection.

The marathon dance had been the new fad of 1923. President Harding

died, replaced by Calvin Coolidge. The new air speed record that year was 243.67 miles an hour. One top film was *The Covered Wagon*, a memorial to the lost frontier.

Ford made his ten-millionth automobile in 1924. An American car followed the route of Exodus across the Sinai from Egypt to Israel, crossing in 4 hours instead of 40 years.

In 1925, when a young spelunker named Floyd Collins was trapped in a Kentucky cave, radio bulletins about the futile rescue efforts kept the whole nation on edge until he was reported dead. The crossword puzzle came in. A Tennessee jury found John Thomas Scopes guilty of teaching evolution. Edwin Hubble was announcing proof that many of the hazy astronomical objects called "nebulae" were in fact galaxies outside our own.

I sometimes read such items in the county weekly or a farm paper my father took or copies of the old *Literary Digest* that my Uncle Frank passed on to us. They were never quite so real as the events of my own imagination, yet the universe around me had begun to take a sharper shape.

I was reading with a widened appetite. Books were scarce, though I found a precious hoard in a heavy wooden box my Uncle John had brought from Texas, unopened for years. Besides outdated textbooks, there was a handsome set of Shakespeare and the second volume of Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*. I've never read the first volume, but the conclusion of the book left me as sad as any actual event I recall.

There was a physics book that fascinated me, though it ended with only a tantalizing page or two about atoms and radioactivity. I had decided that I wanted to become some kind of scientist, but there was no way in sight to any sort of scientific education. Launching *Amazing*, Hugo Gernsback opened doors to wonderful worlds I had never even imagined.

The key was a breath-taking promise of progress. Science was power: It revealed the nature of the universe and means to rule it. And "scientification," far from being the trash most people took it for, was present science transformed into future prophecy. That was Gernsback's message. He used it to sell magazines, but I think he really believed it. The masthead of *Amazing* shows the tomb of Jules Verne at Amiens, the immortal writer rising beneath the lifted stone.

That vision of progress captured me. To show its hold, here's a quote from the first thing I wrote for Gernsback, a guest editorial published in the fall issue of *Amazing Stories Quarterly* for 1928. Looked at now, it seems to claim far too much, but it's what I felt then.

"Science goes on, with scientification as the searchlight. Here is the picture, if we can but see it. A universe ruled by the human mind. A new Golden Age of fair cities, of new laws and new machines, of human capabilities undreamed of, a civilization that has conquered matter and

Nature, distance and time, disease and death. A glorious picture of an empire that lies away past a million flaming suns until it reaches the black infinity of unknown space, and extends beyond. . . . The idea of the final product of evolution is beyond us. But a sublime picture it is that sciencefiction may build through the ages, and that science may realize for the ultimate advancement of man."

Gernsback grew up in Luxembourg, with an early interest in electrical gadgets as well as fictional futures. Following his own dream of better times ahead, he came to America in 1904, when he was twenty, with 200 dollars and a battery he had invented. His battery projects failed; but he tried others, among them a firm that imported scientific and experimental equipment which he sold by mail.

By 1908, the year I was born, his catalog had become a radio magazine, *Modern Electrics*, later retitled *Electrical Experimenter* and then *Science and Invention*. He had been writing gadgeteering science fiction for his own how-to-do-it and where-to-buy-it magazines for many years before he launched *Amazing Stories* with the issue for May, 1926. His associate editor was Edison's aging son-in-law, T. O'Connor Sloane, another man as serious as he was about the stories they published as prophetic visions of progress.

As founder of *Amazing*, Hugo has become a hallowed figure in science-fiction fandom, with our most prestigious annual awards, the HUGOes, named in his honor. As a beginning writer who sold stories to him, I stop somewhat short of idolatry. Yet I do feel gratitude, mixed with a certain respect. Gernsback liked science fiction — and invented the name we call it by. He launched that first magazine. I shared his dream of progress then. Many millions did. I can't help feeling that the world was wounded, maybe fatally, when so many of us lost it.

I first heard about *Amazing* from a friend of mine, Edlie Walker, a radio ham confined to a wheelchair. He loaned me the November issue, which carried the opening installment of *The Second Deluge*, by Garrett P. Serviss; it was an epic of cosmic disaster that Hollywood might have welcomed a generation later. I was fascinated, but not completely captured. That winter, I saw free samples advertised in a little farm journal, *The Pathfinder*. I wrote for a copy and received the issue for March, 1927. That hit me harder.

It was all blazingly new, at least to me. Though most of the stories were reprints, I had never seen them before or even guessed that such dazzling marvels existed. I had read and reread the short stories of Edgar Allan Poe, and an old Bulwer-Lytton lost-race romance; but I knew nothing of Wells's great early work. *Argosy* and a few other all-fiction pulps had been running Burroughs and Merritt and other fabulous stuff, but I had never read them — my father felt that pulp fiction was unhealthy for the mind. I remember the stir of eager curiosity once when I saw a copy of *Weird*

Tales on a newsstand, but I had no money for a copy and no real idea of what might be inside.

The cover picture on that free issue of *Amazing* was by Frank R. Paul, illustrating T. S. Stribling's "The Green Splotches." It showed the hyper-civilized, green-blooded plant people of Jupiter taking off from that strange Andean valley in a spectacular spacecraft driven by the pressure of light. Paul's people are wooden dummies when I look back now, but people didn't matter then. He did wonderful starships and monsters and future cities and not-yet-invented machines.

Besides Stribling's haunting novelette, other stories in the magazine were equally enchanting. Wells's "Under the Knife" was a convincing tour of the stellar universe. Burroughs carried me into fantastic adventure with the second part of "The Land that Time Forgot." Perhaps the greatest impact came from Merritt's "The People of the Pit." With its exotic style and arctic settings and dimly glimpsed aliens, it cast a spell I've never forgotten. The following year, it became a model for the first story I sold.

My sister Jo helped me find two dollars for a subscription. It began with the May issue. The Paul cover, lurid and crude as it seems now, seemed enchanting then. Illustrating the second installment of Merritt's first novel, *The Moon Pool*, it carried me into a fantastic world of strange beings and terrifying powers and desperate adventures under the Pacific. My own enchantment was complete.

Merritt was a newspaperman who in time became the highly paid editor of the *Heart Sunday Supplement*, *The American Weekly*. His fiction was only an avocation, and critics ignore it now. I've been afraid to look back into it for many years, because I don't want to spoil the spell I recall, but it dazzled me then. His plots may have lacked originality, but they were new to me. If his work was sentimental and overwritten, I wasn't yet a critic. When my own literary tastes began to form, he was the catalyst. My own first fiction was pretty imitative.

Still a student at home, I had borrowed a typewriter from Uncle John—an ancient basket-model Remington in which the keys struck the bottom of the platen so that you had to lift the carriage to see what you had written; it had a dimming purple ribbon. I had already begun trying to teach myself shorthand and typing, hoping such skills would get me somewhere else. The shorthand was never useful, because I wrote so clumsily that I couldn't read it cold, but now I had a new reason to type. I spent my spare time for the next year writing things to try on Gernsback.

Out of a good many starts, only three or four stories were finished. I mailed them in. They came back with printed rejection slips. Not surprisingly. I misspelled "vacuum" even in the title of "Via the Vacuum Tubeway"—though the idea itself wasn't all that bad. Updating Verne's *Around the World in Eighty Days*, I had my hero winning his race around

the earth on a railway running inside an evacuated tube, in only eighty minutes. More skillfully written, the story might have sold.

Making a very modest start, I got a letter into the back of *Amazing*, a self-consciously stilted missive, praising the magazine and begging for colored illustrations inside. Those letter columns must have been the beginning of fandom. They carried the names and addresses of the writers, and we wrote to one another. Dr. Miles J. Breuer answered my letters, and we later collaborated. Jerry Siegel gave me Ed Hamilton's address and sent me a story of his own for comment; the characters were all geometric solids and not very exciting, but I think their world was an earlier vision of Krypton, from which Superman came.

I got a dollar apiece for two gags I sent to *French Humor*, another magazine of Gernsback's — an inveterate innovator, he was always testing some new publication; the one time I ever saw him, admitted briefly to his office, he gave me a copy of one called *Gadgets*. The most successful of those experiments must have been *Sexology*, which was on newsstands for many years.

Gernsback had offered fifty-dollar prizes for guest editorials. In the summer of 1928, I wrote, or maybe overwrote, my entry for the contest, and then a new short story, "The Metal Man." Working about the farm, I composed them in my head, keeping paragraphs in mind until I had a chance to write them down, a habit that left me sometimes pretty inattentive to actual tasks. (I still work the same way, even on the book of which this is a chapter; and I'm afraid I'm still too often inattentive.) Hopefully, I mailed the story and the editorial to Gernsback. Months passed, with no response.

That summer my father got an unexpected windfall from the sandhill homestead, a thousand dollars for the oil royalty rights — though the seismograph crews still come, no actual oil has ever been discovered. Generously, he used part of the money to send me and my sister Jo away to school at Canyon, Texas. I was still haunting newsstands, in spite of all the odds; and one big day, I found my editorial in print in the Fall issue of *Amazing Stories Quarterly*. A week or two later, on an even bigger day, I recognized my metal man being carried aloft by the crystal creature in the cover illustration for the December *Amazing*.

Incredibly, the blurb compared me to Merritt. "Not since we published 'The Moon Pool' has such a story been published by us. 'The Metal Man' contains an abundant matter of mystery, adventure, and for a short story, a surprising amount of true science. Unless we are very much mistaken, this story will be hailed with delight by every scientific fiction fan. We hope Mr. Williamson can be induced to write a number of stories in a similar vein."

Could I!

Fifty-odd years later, I'm still at it.

THE PERSECUTOR'S TALE

by John M. Ford

art: George Barr

The author has sold stories to Analog Science Fiction, Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine, and Orson Scott Card's anthology, Dragons of Light. Pocket Books published his first two novels, Web of Angels and Princes of the Air. With George Scithers and Darrell Schweitzer, he is the author of On Writing Science Fiction: The Editors Strike Back!

This story is his first sale to Amazing.

We were the usual sort of travelers on the Empire's high roads: unspeaking people bound on unguessable business, united only by a direction of motion. If not for the interruption of our journey, I do not think we would have noticed one another at all. I except myself, of course; but my observations are not detected by their subjects. They would be valueless otherwise.

We stopped at a small inn, with just enough rooms for our party; there were no other guests, and the innkeeper freely admitted that guests were rare. This had nothing to do with the quality of the house, which was excellent; but the city of our destination was only two hours farther by the high road, and the cars did not normally even stop.

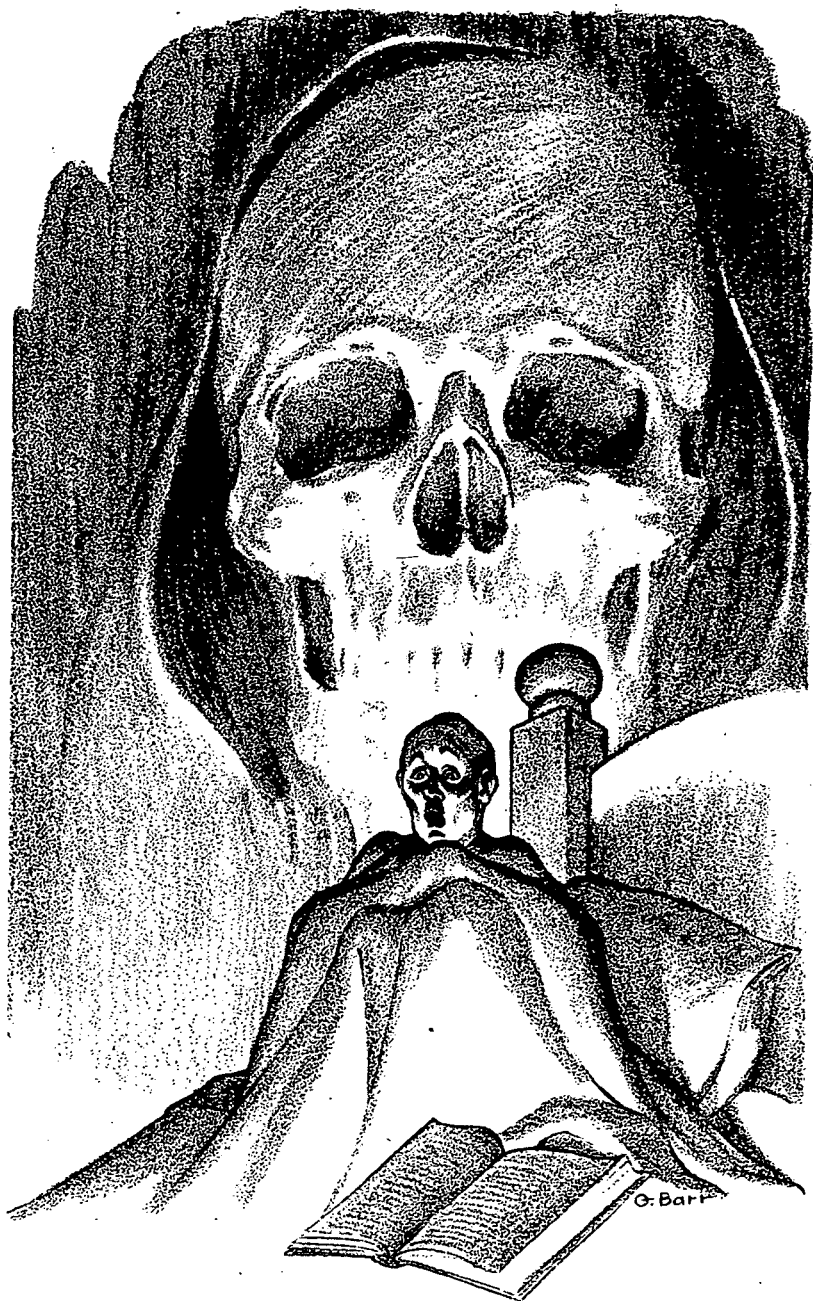
Tonight, though, Midwinter's Eve, wet snow clogged the tracks, and ice coated the catenary, threatening to bring the wire down. It would be much better that we pause short of our goal than possibly be trapped all night in a powerless car.

There were protests, as is customary when an Imperial service performs less than flawlessly, but they quieted when the motorman assured us that our stay would be paid for by the Ministry of Transport; and they ceased when we saw the inn.

It was of the same stone as the mountains around it, with embrasures and round mock-towers at the corners; it sprawled in a manner that suggested intrigues of design but never vulgar randomness. From its leaded prism windows lights shone soft and amber and warm — from our car, in the storm, to call the effect seductive is no exaggeration.

The innkeeper met us at the car, sweeping snow from the platform, and led us inside; as he did so, a young man hitched a pair of mules to the rings on the car's front end. He gave the whip to the motorman, who cracked it once smartly, and the beasts pulled the car around a tightly curved side track — "spur," the word is — toward a small shed at the inn's rear.

The interior was as well appointed as the exterior had been. There were tapestries and paintings on the walls, intricate parquet floors with carpets



in the complex southern style, simply styled furniture scarred with long use. Nothing was remotely modern, and wear showed on every surface, yet the effect was not one of disrepair but of the comfortable patina of age.

A member of our company, a centurion just returned from the Empire's northern frontier, looked in some awe at the massive ceiling beams, and commented that only far beyond his posting could trees of such girth still be found. Another traveler, an electrical engineer, pointed out the paths for wires to the iron candelabra, holes drilled with hand augers long after the beams were raised.

Our host affirmed this, showing us how the candle-holders had been altered for wire and glasslamps. We were impressed (as the innkeeper expected), and not merely with the age of the structure. The times before electricity seem to us, centuries later, as alien, feral, dark in more senses than one.

The only staff at this time of year were the innkeeper's family. His son, who had hitched the mules to the car, now ported our bags, refusing more than modest tips, though there was of course no electric lift. His daughter bustled from room to room, making down beds and checking plumbing for proper function. And his wife was preparing dinner; hot potato-and-mushroom soup followed by a cold collation of sliced beef and mutton. The bread was fresh, from refrigerated dough. Sparkling water came from a spring somewhere on the inn grounds, and the wines were more than good enough. It was said by several of us that the Empress's own chefs could have done no better on such short notice and without their army of potboys and scullery maids, and I believe that to be true. The family were solid, sturdy people, of the sort once called "the hearthbrick of the Empire."

After dinner our party, and our host, sat in the great hall before the main fire, with mugs of hot buttered ale. Snow piled against the windows, and occasionally a gust of wind made whispers and creaks and sucked sparks up the chimney, but it was not hard to forget that there was a storm outside, that we all were kept from appointments in a city leagues away. The glasslamps in the hall were dimmed and tapers lit, both in token of tomorrow's solstice and to conserve generator fuel, and the glimpse recalled of featherbeds upstairs seemed something from a dream.

The innkeeper appeared to notice that our thoughts were straying, and as he refilled our mugs he spoke of this being the longest of all nights, before the shortest of days (touching on the legends of that day), and encouraged us to use up some of the long dark hours in pleasant conversation. Thus it was revealed, gradually, who we were.

I have mentioned the frontier soldier, and the engineer, who was an instructor at a cantonment University. There was another centurion, of the famous 29th Guards, in his violet undress uniform; a young chymist, partner in a firm and of obvious prosperity; a traveling justice, robed in

white, with her two clerks in black and gold. I introduced myself as a journalist, which no longer draws the disapproval it did when I was young and beardless, and tonight seemed even to impress my companions.

The last of us to speak was a spare man, gaunt in fact, in a well-cut suit of red and black chequy, the sort that had been most fashionable in Inner Courts some years ago. His watch-chain was of heavy silver links, his cravat of white silk. In a voice that was quiet but by no means soft, he introduced himself as a persecutor for the state.

There was a pause in sound and action, and then all present — save the innkeeper — did those small, half-conscious actions that outrun thought. The Guardsman reached toward his weapon baldric (which was empty, of course). The frontier soldier muttered something, apparently a complex oath to some minor god. The justice turned slowly to face the persecutor, stroking her back blindfold at the left temple, while a clerk whispered into her right ear. I stroked one finger minutely against another.

The first of us to speak was the engineer; he seemed very thoughtful, though I was not certain what he was thinking of. "That could be a dangerous admission, in a company of strangers," he said, and we waited in the pause, but he said no more.

The chymist, heedless, did. "Surely you're retired, lord sir. No active persecutor would admit the fact, knowing that one of those present —" and then he seemed to hear the ice cracking under him, and was silent. For a long moment wind whistled, fire crackled on without us; then the innkeeper rang his ladle on the kettle of ale. He said, "Please, enough silence. It's a pleasure for me that you're my guests; I'll not have you sleeping here displeased. My lord persecutor."

"Yes?" said the gaunt man, his eyes level and his body calm.

"You've dampened all our spirits with your revelations. Do you not consider that . . . unjust?"

I spoke of thin ice; here was a man who danced on warm water. I watched the justice; her tongue moistened her lips. I observed the two soldiers; their poses told me that they were still armed.

The persecutor said "You, sir, asked me to speak."

The innkeeper did not flinch. "To make conversation, not stop it. I ask you . . . is it just?"

"No," said the gaunt man, quite clearly. "It is not just. You have a forfeit in mind, I think?"

"I do, lord sir. Surely you have traveled widely, surely seen things we have not. Would you tell us a tale?"

"About —"

"About what you like." Our host faced me and said "Of course, sir author, you know the legend of tales told on this night."

I nodded, though I knew none such. And I caught the innkeeper's look,

and I scanned the hearthside circle.

One might have supposed to find us all preparing to make excuses and retire upstairs, to the safe isolation of stone walls and thick down comforters. Not at all. There was an expectation that whispered like the storm-wind in the flue, drawing up sparks.

Our host dipped more ale, stirred up the fire, and I understood; we would hear a ghost story, told as such stories should be in a circle of warmth, and we would sleep well. I wondered what stories the innkeeper's children had heard, growing up in a lonely inn.

The persecutor looked long at me, as if waiting for some professional cue as to the proper forms; but we all know that tales begin at the beginning.

"There was a young person, of influence and prosperity and a devious intelligence," he said, with gathering tempo. "I'll call him a 'he,' for language's sake; but you'll understand that he could have been,—might have been, a she . . .

"He came to decide that, in just one case, for just one act, he was above the law."

Yes. This was just the place to begin.

" . . . but the crime, while horrid, was beyond the reach of ordinary law."

"Murder?" said the chymist, leaning forward in his chair.

"Not murder," said the frontier centurion. "For murder there's hanging, or the reaching blades."

"Or electrocution," said the electrical engineer.

"Horrid," said the persecutor, "but secret, for the young man and his lover conspired, and deeds were done in darkness, and things were thrown into deep water. With her he pursued a course of silence. It was mutual blackmail, of course."

I had seen the two legal clerks touch, earlier; now they touched again.

"And then one night he reached out for her, and touched skin, but not her skin; he felt the dead skin of serpents. He opened his eyes, and dead bare bones looked back. And he knew that the persecutor had come for him, and worse, he knew by whom he was betrayed."

The clerks drew apart. The justice moved her head from side to side, as if waiting for a whispered word from one of them.

"The young man screamed."

Wind cried.

"And when he was done screaming, however long it was, he opened his eyes again . . . and he was alone in the room."

The soldier from the frontier said, "And so he fled?"

"No. At the time, he knew better. As I say, he was very intelligent. He sought . . . redemption —"

"Good," said the engineer.

“— but he sought it as an armor of virtue, a sword of righteousness . . . a medal of good conduct.”

The Guardsman swirled the butter in his ale, and adjusted his baldric and beribboned jacket.

“And he found the things he sought . . . but none of them was the thing he wanted. He had opportunities to become a dead hero, but he was not ready for that.

“And sometimes, on his cot, in the deepest night, snakeskin would brush his cheek, and the persecutor’s bone mask would hover above him. And so he marched to the leaden drum.”

Several did not comprehend; the Guardsman explained the phrase to mean the abandonment of a sound military career. In his voice there was something like relief.

A faint, rapid rustling came from somewhere overhead. The persecutor drank some ale and said, “Having found the honor of symbol inadequate, the young man decided to forget honor. He submerged himself in physical things — and I do not mean the fleshly lusts; sex was far too spiritual for him. I mean artifice, technology. Glass and wood and steel, the mechanical mysteries —”

“There is an owl in the rafters,” the young chymist said, pointing into the dimness above. We all looked up. The owl is the bird of knowledge, legend says. And of judgment. But that is only legend. What can owls know of the sins of men?

“Indeed there is an owl,” said the innkeeper impatiently. “And there is a cat. They share the mice. He’s a good owl, my owl; you needn’t cover your ale. Please, lord sir, continue.”

“I second that,” said the electrical engineer. “Could mechanical illumination dispel your young man’s darkness?”

“Strange that you should say that,” said the persecutor, “for he fancied once to trap the persecutor with carbon arcs and charged wires, and smokes and noise produced by chymistry. And one night his traps all erupted, and he hurried downstairs. He stood at the door to the snare room, hearing the whine and explosion, staring in at the smoke glowing blue-white . . . but he could not go in. He could not bear the thought. So, in his nightclothes, he turned and went out the door.

“There, under the moonless sky, robed all in black with gloves of snakeskin, stood a figure who looked back at him with an eyeless face.

“Then at last he fled, naked.”

“It is not justice,” said the centurion from the northern marches, “to drive a man mad.” The soldier’s voice was not heated; it was quite as cold as the northern wind. “It is not justice, whatever law may say; it is —”

“Persecution,” said the gaunt man. “And that is what it is called.”

The innkeeper’s wife appeared, carrying a tray of light sugared pastries, which were more than welcome.

The persecutor ate his sweetcake without haste, then cleaned his fingers elaborately on a linen napkin. He began again: "The man fled more than a locale. He fled himself. He changed his name each time it was asked, wore clothes twice and burned them, became a thousand travellers on a thousand roads."

"What," I said, "did he give as his trade, and how did he earn his way?"

The persecutor looked at me sharply; but he had examined us all as he spoke. "He had studied many things, and desperation hones cleverness. He was always one who could be here come morning and gone come night."

I nodded. So did the circuit justice.

The engineer said, "Were his trades all honest ones?"

"No. And he admitted this, in those western regions where it is admired. I think you are wondering how this could be, with persecution on him; you misunderstand. The law forbids us to intervene, or even to inform an ordinary constable. If he had been caught, I should have visited him in prison." The persecutor plucked at his clothing, removing invisible crumbs from the red and black squares. "Many persons under persecution choose to multiply their identities; very often it is the last phase of events. For when night after night the persecutor continues to appear, the subject knows, first, that he cannot escape the state; second, that whatever he may call himself, he is the same thing within . . . the evil knows its territory.

"There is a third thing he comes to know . . . that a person without an identity is dead. We all need some 'I,' even a collective 'I' such as a flag or a uniform."

The Guardsman said, "I'm proud of my uniform. And the discipline of . . ." he stopped, looked around, then was silent, embarrassed but not without dignity.

The persecutor did not respond. He said, "In time, as happens, he came to see black cloaks by daylight, though of course only his mind put persecutors inside them. He began to wonder, obsessively, which of the people he saw in the day put on robes by night to haunt him."

"And he attacked one?" the chymist said. "You drove him to further crimes?"

"No. That has never happened."

"I wonder why," said the chymist, with what was doubtless meant to be a deep, wise irony but sounded only as petulance.

There was a pause, until the wind and the whisper of falling snow had erased the echo of the chymist's outburst. The persecutor said, "There is no question that we drive our victims. That is the whole object. Some are driven to extraordinary measures, and this young person was one such. In the persecutor's presence, under a half moon, he —"

"Was redeemed?" I could not tell who had spoken.

"— maimed himself, in a bloody and dreadful manner that I shall not describe."

"This has been known to happen," said the justice, in a high, clear voice. Her face was tilted down, and she stroked her blindfold with the fingers of both hands. Her clerks drew back from her.

The centurion from the frontier said "And was blood enough?" His right hand gripped his left wrist. I have heard that northern men keep a small, thin knife hidden there. "Was it enough? Finish the tale."

"The tale is finished," the persecutor said softly. "It has no proper end. No, Centurion, blood is not enough. Blood is nothing, flesh is nothing. Flesh and blood are wracked with iron, in the halls of physical justice. But iron cannot touch the spirit that sets itself above justice. Thus, I."

The Guardsman said, "Spirit," not loudly, and as if he had never heard the word.

"Suppose," said the gaunt man, his face flickering in lamelight, "that a god appeared on earth, and said 'I offer you absolution. It is a gift; there is no obligation. I forgive you, it is done.'"

"A strange idea, I agree. But supposing there were such a god, what would we people do? Take the offer, no doubt. And then return to the pleasures of evil . . . and take it again. Steal, be absolved. Kill, be absolved. We all know the value of things that cost nothing — and if gods did make the world they must know it too.

"So a price would have to be established. A transcendent price, that one would have to try and pay . . . and which one could afford to pay only once in one's life."

The engineer spoke. "And in the absence of a god . . . when is the price paid?"

The persecutor stood up. His movements were stiff, as with cold, though it was pleasantly warm in the hall. Perhaps he had been still for too long. He went to the fire and gazed into it. "In the absence of a god, there can be no absolute. I know . . . when I see, and hear.

"And that . . . is the end . . . of my story."

The frontier soldier stood then. "Please pardon my rudeness, but I have been accustomed to a different sunset. I shall be retiring now."

"No rudeness in it," said the innkeeper. "If you rise before I, do come down to the kitchen for early tea."

The centurion bowed slightly and went up the stairs.

"I too am tired," the justice said, and rose on her clerks like crutches. "Good night to you all."

And then the rest of us followed, one by one: "Good night . . . my friends." "Good night and untroubled dreams." "Good night."

As I went upstairs, I heard the innkeeper say. "Do retire, sir, before you fall asleep; a bed will favor your back much more than that chair." And

then he walked out of the hall, leaving the Guards centurion sitting straight and alone, looking at nothing.

Overhead, feathers rustled. "Who?" said the owl. "Who?"

I turned at the landing and closed the door of my room behind me.

The room was small, but very neat. A small lamp was lit on the nightstand; a bit of beef and cheese and a covered cup of warm tea were there as well. The crisp bedclothes were turned back, and looked inviting. But.

I opened the inner lining of my kit bag, and took out what was hidden there; put on the shapeless cloak, the skullbone mask, the long gloves of black snakeskin, and the heavy silver ring with its swirling fire opal. A tiny silver pipe went into my throat.

My step has always been light, and our innkeeper kept his doors oiled and true. I opened the one I sought without a sound.

The only light in the gaunt man's room came from the bedlamp. He was reading in bed; the book slipped from his fingers, slipped down the sheets to the floor as he pulled the blankets up. He reminded me of a picture in a book I had read as a child: a drawing in red and black of a little old woman who has heard a noise in the night. It is odd that I still remember it so clearly.

"I heard your tale," I said, the pipe in my throat buzzing and trilling.

He stared at me, as he had looked at all of us in the hall, wondering now the other side of the question; but the mask hid my face, the cloak my body, the throat-pipe my voice. And his eyes were drawn irresistibly to the opal, which blazed in the dim electric light. Perhaps, he would be thinking, I had been none of the guests; a window-peeper in the snow. Or the innkeeper, or the owl in the rafters, or a spirit in the fire. The persecuted think amazing things.

He nodded a little, but did not speak; and I said, "You seem to have learned many things, in your travels."

He found his voice; it was firm, more to his surprise than mine. "It was said that I was intelligent."

"You have recognized who pursues you."

Another nod. "Yes . . . I showed that tonight, didn't I. You're . . . myself. I — I'm sorry if what I did tonight was . . . wrong, or offended—"

I waved my unringed hand. "This has been known to happen," I said, and saw him start, and recalled that the justice had spoken those words. Well. It would not matter. "And do you then know what it is that I am looking for?"

He still clutched the sheets, and stared at his knuckles and wrists like a schoolboy looking for notes cribbed there. Then he looked up at my ring, and then at my black pit eyes.

He said, "No, I do not know." A pause. A breath. Faintly I heard his heart. "But I am willing to take whatever you have for me."

I smiled, though of course there was no outward sign. I extended my ringed hand.

He could not take his eyes from the flickering stone. He bent his head and kissed it lightly.

I brushed the ring against his bare throat, touched a trigger. The fang moved softer than a whisper. His grip on the bedclothes relaxed, and he toppled with a sigh and a rustle of linen.

His face, half-hidden, smiled childishly.

I returned to my room, disrobed, coughed up the silver pipe, and packed the things away. I wrapped myself in a velvet bedrobe and sat by the window to sip the tea and watch for dawn. On such nights I need no sleep.

The morning was bright and crystal clear; and as we all sat at an enormous breakfast the motorman appeared, with the news that the high road was cleared all the way to the city.

I cannot say our pleasure was undiluted; we could think of few finer places to be snowbound. But there were reminders of this business and that, and soon bags were brought down, and goodbyes said to the innkeeper and his family (and more tips paid), and we were all standing on the trolley platform.

The gaunt man stood somewhat apart, looking down the tracks with mingled puzzlement and eagerness, talking with the trolley motorman. "Yes, sir, your ticket is valid to the city," the motorman said patiently. "Yes, these are all the bags you arrived with . . . No, sir, the service doesn't mark coach tickets with the passenger's name . . ."

The electrical engineer listened to this as he finished a sweetcake. He licked jam from his fingers and brushed crumbs from his nose, and whistled without a tune.

"I think he's a bit mad," said the chymist. "Tries his best to ruin our evening, and this morning acts as if he barely remembers. What he did, or us, or his own —"

"He told a scary story, and it scared you," said the frontier soldier pleasantly. "Who knows what he really is?"

"Maybe even a persecutor," the Guardsman added. "Anyway, you ought to spend a night awake in the dark once in a while. Good for the spirit." The two centurions resumed a spirited discussion of favorite weapons.

One of the legal clerks sat on a large bag; the other stood behind her, his hands on her shoulders. They were not looking at one another . . . but perhaps after long service to a justice one's own eyes become less essential.

I felt a hand brush mine, with a surprisingly intimate touch, and I turned to face the justice. She carried a silver stick, and wore a white silk blindfold. "My best to you," she said, in a voice only I could hear.

Perhaps it was only her custom before traveling. Surely so, for she spoke also to the gaunt man, who kissed her hand, and then touched his lips to her bandaged eyes. I noticed the white cravat was missing from his throat.

The motorman rang the bell, and the party filed aboard. I was last, and before I stepped into the car I signaled to the driver; he nodded and closed the door, and the car pulled away without me, its spidery pantograph singing a long fading note on the pristine air.

The innkeeper came out to sweep the platform. Without surprise — I wonder what could surprise him — he said, “You’ll be staying a little longer, sir?”

“Yes,” I said. “My appointments are postponed a little while. I shall travel on later.”

“Pleased to have you, sir.” He paused in his sweeping. “Did the thin gentleman board all right?”

“Yes, he did.”

“He was all questions when he woke this morning, as well as waking late.”

“You seem to have answered them well.”

He began to speak, I believe to say an automatic “Thank you, sir,” but after a moment he said instead, “My good wife and I have raised two children from birth. The questions were not wholly strange.”

He leaned upon his broom, and looked with me toward the now-distant trolley-car. “It’s Midwinter’s morning, sir. This is the day, they say, that journeys end.”

I moved a finger slightly, stroking it across another. The gesture would mean nothing to anyone not a persecutor. Only those who wear the opal ring know that it has two triggers, two fangs, two venoms.

The other brings death by convulsion, often breaking bones.

We call it Remembrance.

I have used both, according to need.

I said, “That is the legend . . . and also the day when lost things are found again.”

We went inside, where the fire was warm, the beds were inviting, and the owl slept.



THAT P.O. BOX IN SCHENECTADY THAT YOU'VE ALL HEARD SO MUCH ABOUT

By Phil Foglio and Freff

art: Jack Gaughan

The authors, Freff and Phil Foglio, live a few blocks from each other in Brooklyn NY; Phil with his two cats and two fanartist Hugoes, Freff with his three cats and 57 musical instruments. They have pooled their f's into a partnership, ffantasy ffactory, to write, draw, and publish Things.

The room had three doors and no windows, and although these were its most obvious irregularities (the decor being in a class all its own) they were by no means its most truly irregular; for at least their intentions were clearly marked. The first door said IN. The second, directly across the room, said OUT. The third door, perpendicular to the other two, was smaller, narrower, darker-grained, carven with subtle and disturbing designs. Above its crystal knob were elegant gilt letters exactly one inch high that read, simply:

DO NOT OPEN.

Without even a please to soften the command, *This* was a door that let you know where it stood.

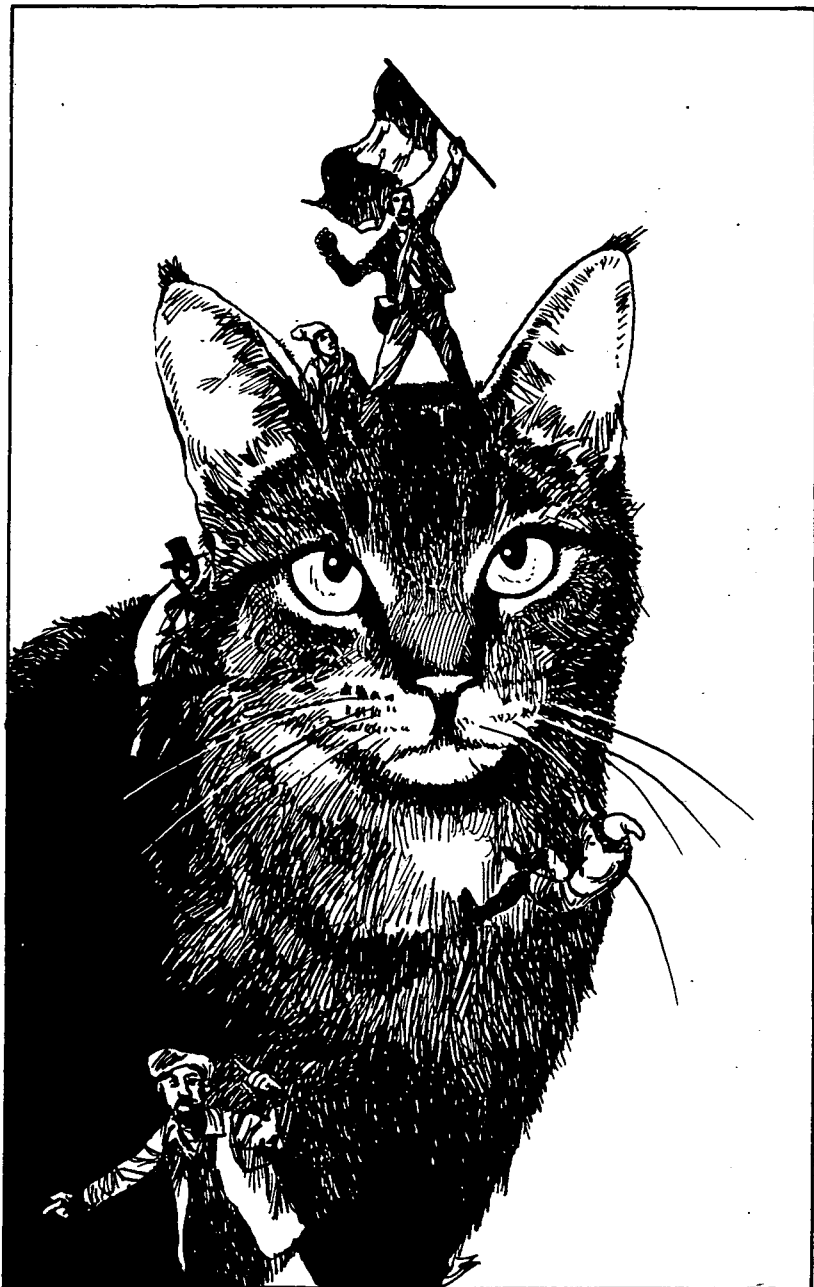
And the decor?

Happy hodge-podge, careful chaos . . . tasteless tastefulness. All that, and more. The basic furnishings were an inexpensive French Provincial, repeatedly reupholstered. But there was also an eight-foot-tall antique brass-bound mirror, a massive and ornate cuckoo clock, dozens of badly framed landscapes, an annoyingly "modern" television set, three different cheap stereos, an extensive congregation of houseplants gathered in ranked circles around a tower of fluorescent plant-lites, and two pink plaster flamingoes standing at attention on either side of an old brick fireplace.

It was early in the evening, and a small fire danced cheerfully behind the grille.

Mr. Pomene and Mrs. Ope paid it no heed, Mr. Pomene because he was comfortably settled into his armchair, reading a day-old newspaper, and Mr. Ope because she had put aside her knitting to finally read the mail. Only the orange cat lying in Mr. Pomene's lap watched the flames cavort, and even that grudging attention seemed given with the baleful eye of a critic. Things that were not edible really shouldn't draw such

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attention to themselves.

"Oh look, Mel, this will please you. We've finally gotten another letter from Harlan. Such a nice boy."

"Um," grunted Mr. Pomene. "Did he remember to include a check?" Mrs. Ope peeked into the envelope. "Yes, dear. And he's paid in advance for the next three months. I told you he was a good boy. Didn't I tell you? I can always tell. I got that from mother's side of the family."

"You're the very image of her, Cally," said Mr. Pomene without glancing up.

"I'll put him back on the mailing list first thing in the morning. Goodness! It says in his letter that he's sorry things got so confused, but that he's been wrapped up in some sort of silly old lawsuit. No wonder he gave up the service for a while — I know lawyers always put *me* off."

"Ben Franklin," said the cat, "felt exactly the same way."

Mr. Pomene looked down in annoyance. "How would you know?"

The cat blinked haughtily. "He told me," it said.

Enough was too much. Mr. Pomene flung his paper aside angrily. "You just hold it right there, furface. I've sat back and accepted almost every piece of idiotic claptrap you've spouted around here, but this is too Goddamn much. Do you seriously expect me to believe that you — a *cat*, for God's sake, a grubby orange tomcat! — are over two hundred years old? Hah!"

"Two hundred?" The cat flattened its ears. "*Two hundred?* You pathetic hyperthyroid orangutan, I was being pampered by the Pharaohs when they were putting up the pyramids."

"That tears it, buster! It's back to the ASPCA for you — and *this* time we aren't accepting any collect phone calls!"

"Just for that I won't tell you how they built the damned things!" the cat shouted back.

"Fleabag!"

"Baldy!"

Man and cat glared at each other. The flamingoes said nothing. Mrs. Ope sighed. "Honestly," she said, "I don't know why you two can't manage to get along."

The cat jumped from Mr. Pomene's lap, sniffed disdainfully, and busied itself combing out the fur of its tail.

At that moment the timer attached to the plant-lites shut off their power. Immediately a thin clamor of complaint rose from the assembled flora. "Aw come on, Mizzus Ope," begged a diffenbachia, "just a few more minutes, prettyplease?" "Yeah!" "I just know I was about to bud, really I was." "Golly, it was just settling into a good wavelength!" The din grew as the plants started to beat their stems and fronds against their pots, and chant, in unison: "Don't be sore, give us more!"

"Absolutely not," said Mrs. Ope, kindly but firmly. "The man from

Quigley's Greenhouse said no more than ten hours a day, and you've already sweet-talked me into giving you an extra hour before bed. No. No more. You'll get fat."

"Aw jeez," the plants muttered, and started to shuffle downheartedly back to their normal places around the room.

The IN door slid open and a rather distraught teletype rolled through, clicking and ticking to itself. It pulled up to where Mr. Pomene was kneeling, and waited as he tried to coax a stubborn fern off his newspaper. The fern, protesting what it considered manifoldly unjust treatment, had stopped exactly one foot short of its niche next to the armchair.

At last the teletype could contain itself no longer, and nudged his ankle gently.

He gave up on the paper and framed a mental prayer for fern blight. "Yes, Tommy?"

I HAVE AN IDEA, the machine printed.

"Well?"

A NEW TIME-TRAVEL GIMMICK SIR.

"Why bother me with it? You know where to file the science-fiction notions."

YES sir. I know sir. But the Apple III said it wasn't any good and he's so state of the art and I'm just a poor teletype machine and I wasn't sure I mean I thought it was a good idea but he makes me feel so insecure and uncertain and so I thought I'd ask you.

It paused.

SIR, it added.

"Tommy, who's been working for us the longest, you or it? You know we trust your judgment. You've come up with some really dynamite ideas over the years . . . so just stick it in the files as usual, all right? And we'll kick it around later."

THANK YOU SIR. Clicking more decisively, it rolled towards the door marked OUT. Mr. Pomene and Mrs. Ope watched it fondly as the little machine went away. It had a good heart, albeit no self-respect, and it believed with every atom of that heart in the business. Not at all like the Apple, which seemed to think it was destined for grander things.

Out of the corner of her eye Mrs. Ope noticed the time. "Oh my goodness! Mel — grab the cat!"

Several things happened all at once. The cuckoo clock struck seven. Mr. Pomene made a desperate flying leap for the cat (startling a sleeping footstool in the process, which galloped in terror to a hiding place under the sidetable) and just barely managed to grab the suddenly transformed feline by the scruff of its neck. "It's that time!" the cat howled. "Once, just once, let me at 'em!" Its claws shredded the rug. A miniscule rope ladder unfurled from the bottom of the clock and fell to the floor. With an ear-splitting cry of "Liberty! Equality! Fraternity!" a horde of people,

none more than two inches tall and all wearing the tricolor of the French Revolution, poured from the clock, down the ladder, and out across the room. They scurried everywhere, dusting the furniture, cleaning the rug, polishing the knickknacks on the television, and straightening the magazines and making sure the third door was locked and stacking more wood for the fireplace and just generally seeing that the place was spotless.

All through the job, the cat struggled in Mr. Pomene's grip. "One of 'em! Just one of 'em! I've wanted to take those bastards on for years! Let me go — I'll just play with it a little, I swear!" Mr. Pomene finally trapped it in a hammerlock he'd learned among the lions of Mesopotamia.

"You idiot, you *did* go after them. Remember last month? They turned you into a frog! We had to keep you in a bucket of water for a week, remember?"

The cat's eyes glazed over with unpleasant memories. It shuddered, and all the fight went out of it. "Fluke," it muttered.

The flamingoes said nothing.

Finally, with one last high-pitched patriotic cry, the little people swarmed back up the ladder and into the clock.

Mr. Pomene released the cat. "Well, that's that for another hour. I wish they wouldn't yell like that every time."

"You're the one who wanted French Provincial, dear."

"Well I damned well couldn't stand another day of that Roman Imperial '*Veni! Vidi! Vici!*' over and over, and those aqueducts they built everywhere . . ."

"This is a very old argument and there really isn't anything to be gained by it. You know we have to keep the place clean for company. Why don't you just relax again and read your paper?"

"Can't. The little buggers took it with them." He stood up. "Come on, cat, we might as well get some work done. Speaking of company, Cally, have we got anybody coming over tonight?"

"Yes," she said, resuming her knitting. "There's a young fellow joining us for dinner in just a little while. He was recommended to us by Lizzy. I'm sure he'll be a very nice young man. I have a feeling about it. While you're up, why don't you turn on you counsin's alchemy lamp? You know how that impresses newcomers."

Mr. Pomene walked over to the television set. On top of it, along with various framed and yellowing photographs, was a bell jar containing a large shiny rock. He pressed a switch at the jar's base. The rock began to crumble and change color, and Mr. Pomene watched, fascinated as the first time, as the lump of gold (element 79) changed into mercury (element 80.)

"I don't care what Brad thinks. I say he ought to market this gadget before somebody beats him to it."

"Now dear, you know very well the bottom dropped out of the novelty lamp market back in the sixties. When was the last time you saw one of those lava-lights?"

Mr. Pomene was still trying to organize a convincing counter-argument when the cat spoke up. It was standing on its hind legs, looking into one of the framed landscapes, and fur was standing in wild ridges along its spine.

"We've got some heavy action here . . . whoops! Shut your eyes, everybody, quick!"

They just made it. An incredibly bright, incredibly brief flash of light erupted inside the picture frame, a flash so bright they could see it as a red glow through their closed eyelids. It was warmer in the room, afterwards; and all the plants leaned in the direction of the flash with an avid interest.

The flamingoes said nothing.

The cat peered carefully over the edge of the frame. Where there had once been a striking vista there was now only smoldering, fused glass and a glow like banked hellfire. "Scratch one galactic empire," it said.

"Damn," said Mr. Pomene. "I'm going to hate having to tell Frank the series is over. He did awfully well with that one." Feeling a little guilty — on some level he was convinced that if he looked in on them more often, these little flareups wouldn't happen — he picked up his clipboard and started to carefully examine each landscape, taking occasional notes. The cat helped out by studying those below waist-level and calling out anything that looked particularly interesting.

"I do hope tonight's young man doesn't want a trilogy," Mrs. Ope fretted. "Every time you have to cut a new hole in that wall I worry about your bursitis."

"Aren't you getting a little ahead of things? He's got to pass the Test, first. Me, I just hope he's not a skeptic. I can't stand those clowns. Remember that insurance salesman from Sheboygan with delusions of grandeur? The one who wanted to see our references? Hmph. *Our* references, I ask you, just as though we were some amateur outfit and not one of the most reputable Idea Houses in the world for over . . . over . . ." He turned and addressed one of the old photographs on top of the television. "Hey, Dad! How long have we been doing this?"

The figure in the photo (an ancient and wizened man nearly lost within a voluminous Turkish bathrobe) stroked its beard and scratched its head, figuring. "Well, the family's been at it for five-hundred-and-twenty years, near as I can put t'gether, and you've been handling the last eighty-seven of it."

"Thanks, Dad."

"S' okay, son. Everybody's memory kinda craps out after the first fifty years or so."

The doorbell rang.

“That’ll be the new feller,” said Mr. Pomene’s father’s picture.

“I’ll go let him in. Cally, you flag down the kitchen and tell it we’ll be ready to eat soon.”

“Gonna be a cretin, I bet,” said Mr. Pomene’s father’s picture. “You just don’t get the same class o’ feller we *used* to get. Now you take that Eddie Poe, or Sam Clemens, there was real talent. Them fellers knew how to take a good idea and make it steam. Yes sir. Make it *steam*.”

The figure of the old man in the photograph mumbled this critical proclamation over and over again to itself, until at last it drifted off to sleep.

By the time Mr. Pomene came back through the IN door, leading their somewhat dazed-looking guest, Mrs. Ope had arranged things with the highly temperamental kitchen and done some last minute touchup to her hair, knowing she was at her best as soon as her mirror image gave her a thumbs-up sign. She always wanted to look her best for potential customers.

The moment she saw this new young man her heart went out to him, utterly without restraint.

“Uh . . . hi,” he said, looking around nervously. “My name’s Tom. Tom Selman. Lizzy wrote you about me . . . ?” Everything about him was a *wasn’t*. He wasn’t tall, but then he wasn’t exactly short, either; and he wasn’t ugly, but he certainly wasn’t handsome . . . in fact, on first glance, he wasn’t much of anything at all. In the whole wide world he resembled nothing so much as a just-punished Labrador puppy with glasses and terrible taste in sportcoats.

Mr. Pomene surveyed Tom critically from behind the young man’s back, and frowned; but Mrs. Ope was smiling. “Yes, dear. She did. In fact, she had some very nice things to say about your writing talent . . . tsk, silly old me, forgetting *all* my manners. I’m Mrs. Ope, Tom; and that’s Mr. Pomene. This is where we live and work and you are very welcome here.”

“Right.” Mr. Pomene did not sound convincing.

“Do sit down.” Mrs. Ope took Tom firmly by the sleeve and guided him to one of the armchairs in front of the fire. He tripped over his own instep twice on the way. “Can we get you something? Water? Wine? Coffee or tea? Some Ovaltine? Maybe you’d like a little fresh pomegranate juice?”

“Err . . . do you have any root beer?”

“If I were you,” said Mr. Pomene, “I’d take the wine. You’ll need it.”

“Huh?”

“Mel! You stop that!”

“It’s good advice, Cally. The Test is never easy.”

“Test?”

“*The Test*.” intoned Mr. Pomene in graveyard tones.

"I have to take a *test*?" Years of academic horror rose, unbidden, to terrorize him. "Lizzie didn't say anything about a —"

"Mel Pomene, you hush right now and don't say another word! You've got no cause to scare the poor boy the minute he walks in." To Tom she added, soothingly, "It's nothing, dear. Just a little formality."

"The Test is not nothing — it's *everything*. And it's damned hard!"

Mrs. Ope fixed a grim and righteous eye on her companion.

"I would very much appreciate it if you'd save these good-cop/bad-cop routines for our mystery-writer clients. Just *once*, I wish you could be considerate to a new guest."

"I'll bet he was born in Sheboygan."

"Los Angeles," offered Tom, meekly. His borrowed tie seemed awfully tight, all of a sudden; and both his socks were sliding down the sweat on his calves.

Mr. Pomene was about to continue when Mrs. Ope stopped him with a primal glare. She turned to Tom.

"Would you excuse us for a minute? Mr. Pomene and I are going to go see if dinner has landed yet, and *have a little chat*. You just make yourself comfortable. Look around, if you want. We'll be right back."

It wasn't until they'd vanished through the **OUT** door that Tom's derailed consciousness noticed the phrasing: see if dinner has *landed*? What the — ? He shook his head once, and then again for good measure, and took (he was certain) the first breath he had managed to take since arriving.

Lizzie was going to get a letter about this. She really should have warned him before sending him to his loony bin. And what was all this stuff about a test?

Tom shivered. No. *The test*.

Trying to calm himself, he sat back in the armchair and minutely examined his surroundings. And, as he did so, noticing the greenhouse grab-bag of plants, the clashing television and clock and mirror, the ratty French Provincial, the doors marked **IN** and **OUT** and (oh yeah?) **DO NOT OPEN**, his nervousness and incipient breakdown began to recede before a new tide of thought that wasn't frightening at all. Only embarrassing

It's a practical joke, he thought. The words washed through his head.

Sure. He could see it all now, or near enough, and it was such an old story he couldn't even be angry about it, except perhaps a very little bit at himself for being so gullible. There he had been, in his latest creative writing class, trying hard to impress his instructor — a real live author, published and everything, the first he had ever met — and when he had finally confided in her about his difficulty finding good ideas, and had asked her where she got hers, and she had said *there's this post office box in Schenectady, see . . .* He'd fallen for it.

Very funny. Also, typical.

But where had she dug up these lunatics, and why were they playing along with the gag?

Maybe, he thought, they're relatives. Very sick relatives.

There was an orange cat looking at him with extreme solemnity. He rose from the chair and bowed, formally offering it for new occupancy. "I'd stay and let you sit in my lap," he said, "But I've decided to get the Hell out of this madhouse."

"Don't blame you," said the cat.

From the knees down Tom did an excellent and entirely spontaneous impersonation of jello. "D-did you just say something?"

"Wouldn't sit on your lap anyway, fella. I'd clash with your pants." The cat, apparently considering this its final word, jumped onto the armchair and settled there in a posture that would have shamed a professional contortionist.

Tom's sense of reality gave at the edges. "Right," he said. "A talking cat. I've travelled cross-country to a place where they sell ideas and I have just met a talking cat." He wanted very much to move, but someone appeared to have disconnected his legs. Both socks were all the way down now. His shirttail had worked loose. The insides of his glasses were fogging with sweat; but he didn't notice that, since his eyes were thoroughly screwed shut.

"There is no such thing as a talking cat," he muttered to himself. "And as there is no such thing I couldn't possibly have heard it, I couldn't have heard it, I didn't hear it, *I didn't hear it* . . .

Slowly this litany calmed him, and after a time he found he could once more open his eyes.

Every plant in the room had gathered in a circle around him.

"OF COURSE YOU HEARD IT, YOU IDIOT!" they all shouted. The flamingoes said nothing.

The final rip in his sense of reality yawned open beneath his feet; and, taking the easy way out, he let himself fall in. On the way down he thought he heard one of the plants whine, "Mister, could you turn on the plant-lites?"

But he wasn't sure.

"Do you feel like eating now?" True concern was in Mrs. Ope's voice.

"I'm not sure."

"Please try. The kitchen will sulk for weeks if it thinks it isn't appreciated."

"Okay. I guess I can try." Tom reached for his spoon, and watched unimpressed as it dodged round to the other side of the plate. It didn't surprise him. After the incident with the cat and the plants, and that funny lamp on the TV, and that peculiar cuckoo clock with the little Frenchmen in it — he glanced over at the cat's table setting, and watched

it snarl quietly to itself as it soaked its recently acquired flipper in a fingerbowl — ah yes, those little Frenchmen . . . after all that, he doubted he could ever be surprised again.

He said as much, as he faked out the spoon by reaching for the knife and then swooping left at the last minute.

"You'll find out different when you take The Test," said Mr. Pomene. Whatever Mrs. Ope had said to him had worked; his tone was considerably kinder, almost friendly.

"I'm not sure I want to."

"What? But you have to, son!"

Tom was finding the food even harder to catch than the spoon had been. He gave up, and looked Mr. Pomene straight in the eye.

"How come?"

"Because our service is special, that's why!"

"Temper, Mel, temper," said Mrs. Ope. "What he means, Tom, is that we have to find out if we're right for each other."

"But I need ideas, and you sell them. Isn't that enough?"

"I'm afraid not, dear."

"Look," said Mr. Pomene. "I'll put this bluntly. We're not just any old idea factory. We're something special. I mean, if all you want to do is become another tired old hack straining to pay the rent, why, we could send you to any one of a dozen competitors. They wouldn't put you through any tests, except maybe a credit check. All they care about is getting your money. But all *you'd* get is the same mimeographed monthly sheet they'd send to a thousand other customers.

"Oh, they'll tell you that doesn't matter. They'll say that any two writers given the same idea will come up with two different stories. But that has never been our family's policy. We're strictly one to a customer here, one at a time and no duplication. That and the quality of our ideas combine to make us the best Idea House in the whole Goddamn world, and so we've got to make sure that we only take on people who have a shot at being the best *authors* in the world."

"That's why you have to take The Test, dear," said Mrs. Ope. "No matter how frightening or difficult it may be."

Tom looked dubious. "How can I make up my mind about it when I don't even know what it is?"

"That's simple enough. All you have to do is open that door" — Mr. Pomene pointed at the disturbingly carved one marked **DO NOT OPEN**. " — and successfully face down what is inside."

"Yeah? And what's that?"

"It varies. But whatever it is, it'll be the worst thing you'll ever have to cope with as a writer. I guarantee it."

"Then my answer is no. Mrs. Selman didn't raise her boy to be a coward, but she also didn't raise him to be an idiot. After all the crazy

stuff that's gone down in this place I'm not walking into *anything* with my eyes closed. No way."

Mrs. Ope sighed heavily. "Then we won't be able to sell you any ideas." The potential loss seemed to stagger her. Tom could see that she was barely holding back one large and eloquent tear.

"But dammit —" he said, and then the inner waffling began. Different parts of his being chose up sides, like on a baseball diamond, and started to bash away at the ball of his thoughts. On one hand, maybe he didn't need these people after all. Maybe by hard work and diligent application he could break the block and start generating his own ideas. Hadn't he thought of one just a few years back? . . . on the other hand, he hadn't managed that *yet*. And all he wanted to be was a writer; but a writer without ideas was about as useful as a goiter, and a lot more unpleasant to live with.

Of course, there was . . .

But maybe . . .

If . . .

Then again . . .

Tom's internal World Series went into extra innings.

Mr. Pomene frowned and began impatiently drumming his fingers on the tabletop. Mrs. Ope watched hopefully. The cat jerked its tail back and forth (mostly because it had troubles of its own). The plants leaned towards the table, trying to suss out the vibe.

Mr. Pomene's father's picture could, at last, stand no more. "Make up your rinky-dinky mind already!" it shouted.

"*Don't pressure me!*" Tom shouted back. He put his head in his hands. "Oh lord, lord, if only I could have some kind of sign . . .

A thunderous crash rattled the room, as if a wrecking ball had come down on the roof. Tom looked up in surprise. The cat looked up in disgust, muttering "*not again.*" The flamingoes said nothing. There was yet another crash; and this time the entire ceiling shattered in a mosaic of fine, twisting cracks. Greenish gas poured forth from these, but not far; and in mere instants the ceiling was obscured by a dense and boiling cloud of smoke, out of which descended, just at though there had never been a ceiling there at all, a woman's hand. The hand was well-manicured, wore bright red fingernail polish, and was easily fourteen feet across from thumbtip to little pinky.

Tom's mouth was having trouble working. "T-t-that isn't t-the . . . the hand of . . ."

"Oh no, dear," said Mrs. Ope. "Wrong color nail polish."

The giant hand did three things.

First, it descended majestically from the cloud and tapped Tom on the chest, light as a sunbeam, with its outstretched index finger. Then it pointed at the dark wooden door (which, Tom noted, no longer said **DO**

NOT OPEN; instead the small gold leaf letters spelled out the rather direct **FISH OR CUT BAIT, SELMAN.**)

Finally, it settled down to drumming its fingers on the floor, setting up seismic waves and counterwaves that had everything in the room involuntarily dancing.

"Okay! Okay! I'll do it!"

The hand stopped, made a circle with its thumb and index finger, and started to retract out of sight.

"Don't look so surprised," said the cat to Tom. "Around here you get what you ask for." He lifted his flipper. "I know."

"I'm very proud of you," said Mrs. Ope. "You've made the right decision."

"Thanks . . . I think. Now what?"

"Why, open it, of course."

He stood up, scared to the very bottom of his soul, and was seized by an incredible need to go to the bathroom. Or throw up. Or both.

"Right," he said. "Here we go." He walked up to the disturbing door; and all he could think of were childhood fears about giant spiders in the basement and ghouls in the closet and all the assorted spooks and demons and monstrosities that were always lurking just out of reach, waiting to grab you. Pandora's box came to mind, as did the lady and the tiger, except that in this particular case he'd had advance assurance that the choice was between competing brands of tigers, and ladies were completely erased from the equation . . .

He almost turned back. But thought of the giant hand stopped him; and then his hunger for writing and ideas asserted itself, and he found his fingers clutching the door's crystal knob.

He shuddered once, suppressed a scream, closed his eyes . . . and flung the door open!

Nothing happened.

Patting himself to make sure he was still there, Tom opened his eyes.

Through the doorway he saw a room bare except for a desk, chair, and typewriter. To the right of the typewriter was a ream of blank white paper. Behind the typewriter, leaning against the wall so that it faced whoever might sit down in the chair, was a mirror.

"That's IT?!"

Mr. Pomene and Mrs. Ope bustled up to his side and looked in. Mrs. Ope beamed. Mr. Pomene looked pleasantly surprised, and said — with a note of true respect, for the first time in the evening — "Actually, son, you're looking pretty good so far. Some of our most successful clients got that one. Hemingway, for example. Charlie Dickens, too; or so my dad's picture tells me."

"But . . . but . . . what do I do?"

Do? Hell, you go in there and you write something!"

"But I don't have any ideas!"

Mrs. Ope looked deeply into his eyes. "Listen to me, Tom. Think about all you've gone through here. Think about all you've seen, and felt, and heard. You've been deep down in the motherlode of ideas for hours now . . . don't you think there's something, some little thing that has caught a spark in you? You just go and try it, now." She patted his hand reassuringly. "Try it for me."

He stumbled uncertainly into the room. Once seated, he stared at the image of himself that stared back from the mirror.

"That's my biggest problem as a writer — me?"

"Isn't it for all the best writers?" asked Mr. Pomene.

Mrs. Ope gave Tom a last brave smile. "Do your best, dear. We'll wait outside."

Mr. Pomene and Mrs. Ope busied themselves with the mundane necessities of work and life — cleaning away the dinner dishes curing the cat, combing the coleanders, chastising the Apple III — but with one ear each, they listened. At first they heard only hesitant bouts of typing and the regular sound of sheets of paper being crumpled and tossed aside. But gradually, almost imperceptibly, the percentages shifted. The staccato rhythm of typing caught up, took over, surged into the lead. Three hours passed, then four (during which the cat studiously ignored the little Frenchmen from the clock, even when they braided the hair on its tail), until — just after midnight — the typing stopped.

Mr. Pomene and Mrs. Ope were ready and waiting when the door to the almost-bare room opened. As Tom stepped out, exhausted, holding high a sheaf of manuscript, they lifted glasses of the ritual vintage champagne that tradition declared necessary.

An already-drunken smile lit up Tom's face.

"I did it! I Goddamn well hallelujah *DID IT!*"

"Welcome to the service, son." said Mr. Pomene.

Mrs. Ope took a sip of the champagne and started to cry tears of unabashed joy. "See, Mel, I knew it. I knew he was a good boy. I can always tell."

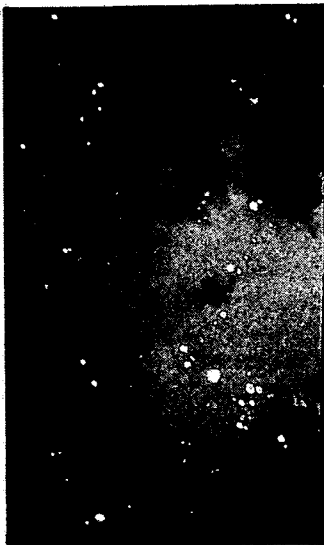
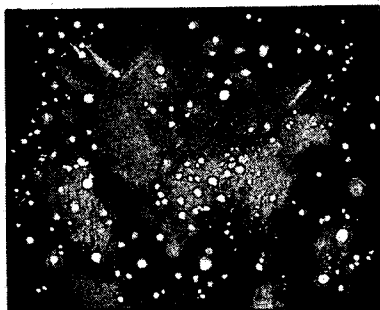
The first flamingo said nothing, and the second nodded in total agreement.



THE CHANGELING

by Robert Silverberg

art: Artifact



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84 Amazing

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Just as the startling facade of the Temple of Quetzalcoatl came into view on the far side of the small pyramid, Hilgard felt a sudden touch of vertigo, and swayed for a moment as though a little earthquake had rippled through the Teotihuacan archaeological zone. He leaned against a railing until the worst of the queasiness and confusion had passed. The heat? The altitude? Last night's fiery dinner exacting its price? Down here in Mexico a tourist learned to expect that some kind of internal upset could strike at any time.

But the discomfort vanished as quickly as it had come, and Hilgard looked up in awe at the great stone staircase of the temple. The jutting heads of the feathered serpents burst like the snouts of dinosaurs from the massive blocks. Traces of the original frescos, perhaps fifteen hundred years old, glinted here and there. Hilgard took eight or nine photos. But he was too hot and dusty and weary to explore the wondrous building with any real vigor, and he still felt a little shaky from that dizzy spell a moment ago. The pressure of time was on him also: he had promised to meet his driver at two o'clock at the main parking lot for the return trip to Mexico City. It was nearly two now, and the parking area was at least a mile to the north, along the searing, shadeless thoroughfare known as the Avenue of the Dead. He wished now that he had started his tour here at the awesome Quetzalcoatl Temple, instead of consuming his morning's energy scrambling around on the two huge pyramids at the other end.

Too late to do anything about that. Hilgard trudged quickly toward the parking lot, pausing only to buy a tepid beer from a vendor midway along the path. By quarter past two he was in the lot, sweaty and puffing. There was no sign of his driver and the battered black cab. Still at lunch, probably, Hilgard thought, relieved at not having to feel guilty about his own tardiness but annoyed by yet another example of Mexican punctuality. Well, now he had time to get a few more shots of the Pyramid of the Sun while he waited, and maybe —

"Señor? Señor!"

Hilgard turned. A driver — not his — had emerged from a shiny little Volkswagen cab and was waving to him.

"Your wife, *señor*, she will be here in two more minutes. She is taking more pictures on the top of the big pyramid, and she says to please wait, she will not be long."

"I think you want someone else," Hilgard said.

The driver looked baffled. "But you are her husband, *señor*."

"Sorry. I'm not anybody's husband."

"Is a joke? I am not understanding." The driver grinned uncertainly. "A blonde woman, dark glasses. I pick you and she up in front of the Hotel Century, Zona Rosa, ten o'clock this morning, you remember? She said to me, ten minutes ago, tell my husband wait a little, I go take more pyramid pictures, just a few minutes. And—"

"I'm staying at the Hotel Presidente," Hilgard said. "I'm not married. I drove out here this morning in a black Ford cab. The driver's name was Chucho."

The Mexican's grin, earnest and ingratiating, stayed on his face, but it grew ragged, and something hostile came into his eyes, as though he was beginning to think he was being made the butt of some incomprehensible gringo prank. Slowly he said, "I know Chucho, yes. He took some American people down to Xochimilco this morning. Maybe he was your driver yesterday."

"He met me outside the Presidente. We arranged it last night. The fare was 1700 pesos." Hilgard glanced around, wishing the man would show up before things got even more muddled. "You must be mistaking me for a different American. I'm traveling alone. I wouldn't mind meeting an interesting blonde, I guess, but I don't happen to be married to one, and I really am certain that you're not the driver I was with this morning. I'm very sorry if —"

"There is your wife, *señor*," said the Mexican coolly.

Hilgard turned. A trim, attractive woman in her late thirties, with short golden hair and an alert, open face, was making her way through the clutter of souvenir stands at the entrance to the parking area. "Ted!" she called. "Here I am!"

He stared blankly. He had never seen her before. As she drew closer he forced a smile and held it in a fixed and rigid way. But what was he supposed to say to her? He didn't even know her name. *Excuse me, ma'am, I'm not actually your husband.* Eh? Was there a television program, he wondered, that went to elaborate lengths to stage complicated hoaxes with hapless unsuspecting victims, and was he at the center of it? Would they shower him with home appliances and cruise tickets once they were done bewildering him? *Pardon me, ma'am, but I'm not really Ted Hilgard. I'm just someone else of the same name and face.* Yes? No.

She came up to him and said, "You should have climbed it with me. You know what they've been doing up there for the past half hour? They're celebrating the spring equinox with some kind of Aztec rite. Incense, chanting, green boughs, two white doves in a cage that they just liberated. Fascinating stuff, and I got pictures of the whole thing. Hold this for me for a minute, will you?" she said casually, slipping her heavy camera bag from her shoulder and pushing it into his hands. "God, it's hot today! Did you have fun at the other temple? I just didn't feel like hiking all the way down there, but I hope I didn't miss —"

The driver, standing to one side, now said mildly, "It is getting late, Mrs. We go back to the city now?"

"Yes. Of course." She tucked a stray shirttail back into her slacks, took the camera bag from Hilgard, and followed the driver toward the Volkswagen cab. Hilgard, mystified, stayed where he was, scanning the parking

lot hopelessly for Chucho and the old black Ford and trying to construct some plausible course of action. After a moment the blonde woman looked back, frowning, and said, "Ted? What's the matter?"

He made an inarticulate sound and fluttered his hands in confusion. Possibly, he told himself, he was having some sort of psychotic episode of fugue. Or perhaps that moment of dizziness at the Temple of Quetzalcoatl had in fact been a light stroke that had scrambled his memory. Could she really be his wife? He felt quite certain that he had been single all his life, except for those eight months a dozen years ago with Beverly. He could clearly envision his bachelor flat on Third Avenue, the three neat rooms, the paintings, the little cabinet of pre-Columbian statuettes. He saw himself at his favorite restaurants with his several lovers, Judith or Janet or Denise. This brisk, jaunty blonde woman fit nowhere into those images. But yet — yet —

He had no idea what to do. His fingers began to tremble and his feet felt like blocks of frozen mud, and he started to walk in a numbed, dazed way toward the Volkswagen. The driver, holding the door open for him, gave him the sort of venomous look of contempt that Hilgard imagined was generally given to gringos who were so drunk at midday that they were unable to remember they were married. But Hilgard was not drunk.

The woman chattered pleasantly as they zipped back toward Mexico City. Evidently they were planning to visit the Museum of Anthropology in Chapultepec Park that afternoon, and tomorrow morning they would move on either to Cuernavaca or Guadalajara, depending on which one of them won a low-keyed disagreement that had evidently been going on for several days. Hilgard faked his way through the conversation, answering vaguely and remotely, and eventually withdrawing from it altogether by pleading fatigue, a touch of the sun. Before long gray tendrils of smog were drifting toward them: they were at the outskirts of Mexico City. In the relatively light Sunday traffic the driver roared flamboyantly down the broad Paseo de la Reforma and cut sharply into the Zona Rosa district to deposit them in front of the slender black-and-white tower of the Hotel Century. "Give him a nice tip, darling," the woman said to Hilgard. "We've kept him out longer than we were supposed to."

Hilgard offered the glowering driver a pair of thousand-peso notes, waved away the change, and they went into the hotel. In the small lobby she said, "Get the key, will you? I'll ring for the elevator." Hilgard approached the desk and looked imploringly at the clerk, who said in fluent English, "Good afternoon, Mr. Hilgard. Did you find the pyramids interesting?" and handed him, without being asked, the key to room 177.

This is not happening, Hilgard told himself, thinking of his comfortable room on the seventh floor of the glossy Hotel Presidente. This is a dream. This is an hallucination. He joined the blonde woman in the

elevator; she pressed 17 and it began to ascend, slowly, pausing dismayingly for a fraction of a second between the tenth and eleventh floors as the power sagged. Room 177 was compact, efficient, with a semicircular double bed and a little bar unit stocked with miniature bottles of liquor, mixers, and such. The woman took a brandy from it and said to him, "Shall I get you a rum, Ted?"

"No. Thank you." He wandered the room. Feminine things all over the bathroom sink, makeup and lotions and whatnot. Matching his-and-hers luggage in the closet. A man's jacket and shirts hanging neatly, not his, but the sort of things he might have owned. A book on the night table: the new Updike novel. He had read it a few months ago, but in some other edition, apparently, for this had a red jacket and he remembered it as blue.

"I'm going to grab a shower," she said. "Then we ought to get lunch and head over to the museum, okay?"

He looked up. She padded past him to the bathroom, naked: he had a sudden surprising glimpse of small round breasts and dimpled buttocks, and then the door closed. Hilgard waited until he heard the water running, and took her wallet from her open purse. In it he saw the usual credit cards, some travelers' checks, a thick wad of well-worn Mexican banknotes. And a driver's license: Celia Hilgard, 36 years old, five feet five, blonde hair blue eyes, 124 pounds, married. *Married*. An address on East 85th Street. A card in the front of the wallet declared that in case of emergency Theodore Hilgard was to be notified, either at the East 85th Street address or at the offices of Hilgard & Hilgard on West 57th Street. Hilgard studied the card as though it were written in Sanskrit. His apartment was on East 62nd Street, his gallery two blocks south of it. He was sure of that. He could see himself quite sharply as he walked down Third every morning, glancing toward Bloomingdale's, turning east on 60th —

Two Ted Hilgards? With the same face?

"What are you looking for?" Celia asked, stepping from the bathroom and toweling herself dry.

Hilgard's cheeks reddened. Guiltily he tucked her wallet back in her purse. "Ah — just checking to see how many pesos you have left. I thought we might want to cash some travelers' checks when the banks open tomorrow."

"I cashed some on Friday. Don't you remember?"

"Slipped my mind, I guess."

"Do you want some of my pesos?"

"I've got enough for now," he said.

They had lunch at the hotel. For Hilgard it was like sitting across the table from a keg of dynamite. He was not yet ready to admit that he had gone insane, but very little that he could say to her was likely to make any

sense, and eventually she was bound to challenge him. He felt like someone who had come into a movie in the middle and was trying to figure out what was going on; but this was worse, much worse, because he was not merely watching the movie, he was starring in it. And found himself lunching with a total stranger to whom he had been married, it seemed, for years. But people who have been married for years have little new to say to one another at lunch, usually. He was grateful for the long silences. When she did speak he answered cautiously and briefly. Once he allowed himself the luxury of calling her by name, just to show that he knew her name; but his "Celia" provoked a quick frown in her that puzzled him. Was he supposed to have used some pet name instead? Or was there a name other than Celia by which everybody called her — Cee, perhaps, or Cele, or Charley? He was altogether lost. Lingered over his coffee, he thought again of that dizzying moment at the Temple of Quetzalcoatl, when everything had swayed and swirled in his head. Was there such a thing as a stroke that affected one's memory without causing any sort of paralysis of the body? Well, maybe. But he wasn't suffering merely from amnesia; he had a complete and unblurred set of memories of a life without Celia, as a contented single man running a successful art gallery, living a fulfilling existence, friends, lovers, travel. Arriving in Mexico City three days ago, looking forward to a week of cheerful solitude, warm weather, spicy food, perhaps some interesting new pieces for his collection. How could a stroke build all that into his mind? With such detail, too: the black Ford cab, Chucho the amiable driver, the seventh-floor room at the Hotel Presidente —

"I've left something upstairs," he told Celia. "I'll just run up for it, and then we can go."

From the room he dialed the Presidente. "Mr. Hilgard, please."

"One moment." A long pause. Then: "Please repeat the name."

"Hilgard. Theodore Hilgard. I think he's in room 770."

A longer pause.

"I'm sorry, sir. We have no one by that name."

"I see," Hilgard said, not seeing at all, and put the phone down. He stared at himself in the mirror, searching for signs of a stroke, the drooping eyelid, the sagging cheek. Nothing. Nothing. But his face was gray. He looked a thousand years old.

They hailed a cab outside the hotel and went to the Museum of Anthropology. He had been there several times, most recently yesterday afternoon. But from what Celia said it was apparent she had never seen it, which was a new awkwardness for him: he had to pretend he had no familiarity with that very familiar place. As they wandered through it he did his best to feign fresh responses to objects he had known for years, the great Olmec stone heads, the terrifying statue of the goddess Coatlicue, the jade-encrusted masks. Sometimes it was not necessary to feign it. In

the Aztec room there was an immense marble stela just to the left of the calendar stone that he could not recall from yesterday's visit, and there was a case of amazing little Olmec figurines of polished jade absolutely new to him, and the Mayan room seemed arranged in an entirely different way. Hilgard found all that impossible to comprehend. Even the huge umbrella-shaped fountain in the museum courtyard was subtly different, with golden spokes now sprouting from it. The cumulative effect of the day's little strangenesses was making him feel giddy, almost feverish: Celia several times asked if he was getting ill.

They had dinner that night at an outdoor cafe a few blocks from their hotel, and strolled for a long time afterward, returning to their room a little before midnight. As they undressed, Hilgard felt new dismay. Was she expecting him to make love? The thought horrified him. Not that she was unattractive; far from it. But he had never been able to go to bed with strangers. A prolonged courtship, a feeling of ease with the other person, of closeness, of real love — that was what he preferred, indeed what he required. Aside from all that, how could he pretend with any success to be this woman's husband? No two men make love quite the same way; in two minutes she'd realize that he was an impostor, or else she'd wonder what he thought he was up to. All the little sexual rituals and adjustments that a couple evolves and permanently establishes were unknown to him. She would be confused or annoyed or possibly frightened if he betrayed complete ignorance of her body's mechanisms. And until he understood what had happened to him he was terrified of revealing his sense of displacement from what he still regarded as his real life. Luckily, she seemed not to be in an amorous mood: She gave him a quick kiss, a light friendly embrace, and rolled over, pressing her rump against him. He lay awake a long time, listening to her soft breathing and feeling weirdly adulterous in this bed with another man's wife. Even though she was Mrs. Ted Hilgard, all the same — all the same —

He ruled out the stroke theory. It left too much unexplained. Sudden insanity? But he didn't *feel* crazy. The events around him were crazy; but inside his skull he still seemed calm, orderly, precise. Surely true madness was something wilder and more chaotic. If he had not suffered any disruption of his brain or some all-engulfing delusional upheaval, though, what was going on? It was as though some gateway between worlds had opened for him at Teotihuacan, he thought, and in that instant of dizziness he had stepped through into the other Ted Hilgard's universe, and that other Hilgard had stumbled past him into his own world. That sounded preposterous. But what he was experiencing was preposterous too.

In the morning Celia said, "I've got a solution to the argument over Cuernavaca versus Guadalajara. Let's got to Oaxaca instead."

"Wonderful!" Hilgard cried. "I *love* Oaxaca. We ought to phone the

Presidente Convento to see if they've got a room — that's such a splendid hotel, with those old courtyards and — ”

She was staring strangely at him. “When were you in Oaxaca, Ted?”

Hesitantly he said, “Why — I suppose — long ago, before we were married — ”

“I thought this was the first time you'd ever been in Mexico.”

“Did I say that?” His cheeks were reddening. “I don't know what I could have been thinking of. I must have meant this was *our* first trip to Mexico. I mean, I barely remember the Oaxaca trip, years and years and years ago, but I did go there, just for a weekend once — ”

It sounded terribly lame. A trip that was only a vague memory, though the mere mention of Oaxaca had made him glow with recollections of a lovely hotel? Hardly. Celia had registered the inconsistency, but she chose not to probe it. He was grateful for that. But he knew she must be adding up all the little contradictions and false notes in the things he was saying, and sooner or later she was apt to demand an explanation.

Within an hour they had everything arranged, and that afternoon they flew down to Oaxaca. As they checked in at the hotel, Hilgard had a sudden horrified fear that the clerk, remembering him from two years ago, would greet him by name, but that did not happen. Sitting by poolside before dinner, Hilgard and Celia leafed through their guidebooks, planning their Oaxaca excursions — a drive to the ruins at Monte Albán, a trip out to the Mitla site, a visit to the famous Saturday morning market — and once again he found it necessary to pretend little knowledge of a place he knew quite well. He wondered how convincing he was. They had dinner that night at a splendid Basque restaurant on a balcony overlooking the main plaza, and afterward they strolled back slowly to their hotel. The night air was soft and fragrant, and music floated toward them from the plaza bandstand. When they were halfway back, Celia reached for his hand. He forced himself not to pull away, though even that innocent little contact between them made him feel monstrously fraudulent. At the hotel he suggested stopping in the bar for a nightcap, but she shook her head and smiled. “It's late,” she said softly. “Let's just go upstairs.” At dinner they had had a carafe of sangria and then a bottle of red Mexican wine, and he felt loose-jointed and tranquil, but not so tranquil that he did not fear the confrontation that lay just ahead. He halted a moment on the landing, looking toward the glittering pool. By moonlight the heavy purple clusters of bougainvillea climbing the ancient stone walls of the courtyard seemed almost black. Huge hibiscus blossoms were strewn everywhere on the lawn and strange spiky flowers rose from a border of large bizarre succulents. Celia touched his elbow. “Come,” she said. He nodded. They went into their room. She turned on a lamp and began to undress. Hilgard's eyes met hers and he saw a host of expressions cross her face in an instant: affection, desire, apprehension,

perplexity. She knew something was wrong. Give it a try, Hilgard told himself fiercely. Fake it. Fake it. He ran his hand timidly along her hip, her thighs. No.

"Ted?" she said. "Ted, what's going on?"

"I can't explain. I think I'm losing my mind."

"You've been so strange. Since yesterday."

He took a deep breath. "Yesterday is the first time I ever laid eyes on you in my life."

"Ted?"

"It's true. I'm not married. I run a gallery at 60th near Second. I came to Mexico alone last Thursday and I was staying at the Presidente."

"What are you saying, Ted?"

"Yesterday at Teotihuacan I started to walk past the Temple of Quetzalcoatl and I felt a peculiar sensation in my forehead and since then I seem to be somebody else of the same name. I'm sorry, Celia. Do I sound incoherent? I don't think I do. But I know I'm not making any real sense."

"We've been married nine years. We're partners in a marketing research firm, Hilgard & Hilgard, on 57th and Sixth."

"Marketing research. How strange. Do we have children?"

"No. We live in a co-op on 85th, and in the summers we — oh, Ted! Ted?"

"I'm so sorry, Celia."

Her eyes, in the moonlit darkness, were fixed, bright, terrified. There was the acrid smell of fear-sweat in the room, hers, his. She said huskily, "You don't remember any of our life together? Not a thing? In January we went to San Francisco. We stayed at the Stanford Court and it rained all the time and you bought three ivory carvings at a little place across the street from Ghirardelli Square. Last month we got the contract for the Bryce account and you said, Fine, let's celebrate by going to Mexico, we've always wanted to go to Mexico and there's no better time than this. In April we have a big presentation to do in Atlanta, and in May — Ted? Nothing, Ted?"

"Nothing. It's all a blank."

"How scary that is. Hold me, Ted."

"I'm so sorry."

"You don't remember us in bed either?"

"The first time I saw you was two o'clock yesterday afternoon."

"We'll have to fly home tomorrow. There's got to be some kind of therapy — a drug treatment, or maybe even shock — we'll talk to Judith Rose first thing—"

Hilgard felt a shiver of surprise. "Who?"

"You don't remember her either."

"That's just it. I do. I know a Judith Rose. Tall handsome olive-

skinned woman with curly black hair, professor of neurobiology at Rockefeller University—”

“At New York Medical,” Celia said. “All the rest is right. You see? You haven’t forgotten everything! You still remember Judith!”

“She’s at Rockefeller,” said Hilgard. “I’ve known her four or five years. She and I were supposed to take this trip to Mexico together, but at the last moment she had to cancel because she got tied up on a grant proposal, and it looked like she’d be busy with that for weeks and weeks, so we decided that I would come down here by myself, and — ”

“What are you saying?” Celia asked, amazed.

“Why, Judith and I are lovers, Celia.”

She began to laugh. “Oh, no! No, that’s too much. You and Judith — ”

“We both see other people. But Judith has the priority. Neither one of us is the marrying sort, but we have an excellent relationship of its kind, and — ”

“Stop it, Ted.”

“I’m not trying to hurt you. I’m just telling you how it is between me and Judith.”

“If you want to tell me you’ve had affairs, I can handle it. I wouldn’t even be immensely surprised. But not with Judith. That’s too absurd. Nothing’s ever certain in this world, but one thing I’m positive of is that Judith doesn’t have any lovers. She and Ron are still like honeymooners. She must be the most faithful woman in the world.”

“Ron?”

“Ron Wolff,” Celia said. “Judith’s husband.”

He turned away and stared through the window. Hollowly he said, “In the world I live in, Judith is single and so am I, and she’s at Rockefeller University, and I don’t know any Ron Wolffs. Or any Celias. And I don’t do marketing research. I don’t know anything about marketing research. I’m 42 years old and I went to Harvard and I majored in art history, and I was married to someone named Beverly once for a little while, and it was a very bad mistake that I didn’t intend to make twice, and I feel sorry as hell for spoiling your vacation and screwing up your life, but I simply don’t know who you are or where you came from. Do you believe any of that?”

“I believe that you need a great deal of help. And I’ll do whatever I have to do to see that you get it, Ted. Whatever has happened to you can be cured, I’m sure, with love and patience and time and money.”

“I don’t think I’m crazy, Celia.”

“I didn’t use that word. You’re the one who talked of losing your mind. You’ve had some kind of grotesque mental accident, you’ve undergone a disturbance of — ”

“No,” Hilgard said. “I don’t think it’s anything mental at all. I have another theory now. Suppose that in front of the Temple of Quetzalcoatl there’s a mystery place, a — a whirlpool in the structure of the universe,

let's say — a gateway, a vortex, whatever you want to call it. Thousands of people walk through it and nothing ever happens to them. But I was the victim of a one-in-a-trillion shot. I went to Mexico in my world and the Ted Hilgard of your world went there at the same time, and we were both at Teotihuacan at the same time, and some immense coincidence brought us both to the whirlpool place simultaneously, and we both went through the gateway and changed places. It could only have happened because our two worlds were touching and he and I were identical enough to be interchangeable."

"That does sound crazy, Ted."

"Does it? Not as crazy as any other theory. Things are different in this world. You, Judith, Ron. The Updike book has a red jacket here. I'm in marketing research instead of art. The museum has a different kind of fountain. Maybe it costs twenty cents to mail a letter instead of eighteen. Everything's *almost* the same, but not quite, and the longer I look, the more differences I see. I have a complete and vivid picture in my mind of the world on the other side of the gateway, down to the littlest details. That can't be just a mental aberration. No aberration is that detailed. How much does it cost to mail a letter?"

"Twenty cents."

"In my world it's eighteen. You see? You see?"

"I don't see anything," Celia said tiredly. "If you can delude yourself into thinking you're entirely different from who you are, you can also very sincerely believe that the postage rate is eighteen cents. They keep changing it all the time anyway. What does that prove? Listen, Ted, we'll go back to New York. We'll try to get you help for this. I want to repair you. I love you. I want you back, Ted. Do you understand that? We've had a wonderful marriage. I don't want it vanishing like a dream."

"I'm so damn sorry, Celia."

"We'll work something out."

"Maybe. Maybe."

"Let's get some sleep now. We're both exhausted."

"That's a fine idea," he said. He touched his hand lightly to her forearm and she stiffened, as though anticipating his caress to be an initiation of lovemaking. But all he was doing was clutching at her as at a rescue line at sea. He squeezed her arm briefly, let go, rolled to the far side of the bed. Tired as he was, he found it hard to fall asleep; and he lay alert a long time. Once he heard her quietly sobbing. When sleep came to him it was deep and nearly dreamless.

Hilgard would have liked to roam Oaxaca for a few days, enjoying its clear air, lovely old streets and easy, unhurried pace, but Celia was insistent that they start at once on the task of restoring his memory. They flew back to Mexico City on the 11 A.M. flight. At the airport Celia learned that there was a flight to New York in mid-afternoon, but Hilgard

shook his head. "We'll stay over in Mexico City tonight, and take the first plane out in the morning," he said.

"Why?"

"I want to go back to Teotihuacan."

She gasped. "For Christ's sake, Ted!"

"Humor me. I won't leave Mexico without making certain."

"You think you're just going to walk back into another world?"

"I don't know what I think. I just want to check it out."

"And you expect the other Ted Hilgard to come strolling out from behind a pyramid as you vanish?"

She was starting to sound distraught. Calmly he said, "I don't expect anything. It's just an investigation."

"What if you do? What if you vanish into that whirlpool of yours, and he *doesn't* come out, and I'm left without either of you? Answer me that, Ted."

"I think you're beginning to believe my theory."

"Oh, no, Ted, no. But —"

"Look," he said, "if the theory's crazy, then nothing will happen. If it isn't, maybe I'll go back where I belong and the right me will return to this world. Nobody knows. But I can't go to New York until I've checked. Grant me that much. I want you to humor me, Celia. Will you do that?"

In the end she had to yield, of course, and they checked their baggage at the airport and booked a hotel room for the night and a flight for the morning, and then they hired a cab to take them to Teotihuacan. The driver spoke little English and it was hard to make him understand that they did not intend to spend all afternoon at the pyramids, but only half an hour or less. That seemed unthinkable to him: why would anyone, even two rich gringos, bother driving an hour and a half each way for a half-hour visit? But finally he accepted the idea. He parked at the southernmost parking lot, near the museum; and Celia and Hilgard walked quickly across the road to the Temple of Quetzalcoatl. His throat was dry and his heart was pounding; and she looked equally tense and drawn. He tried to retrace his steps exactly. "I came through this way," he said, "and just around this corner, as I got my first glimpse of the façade —"

"Ted, please don't. Please."

"Do you want to try? Maybe you'll go through it after him."

"Please. Let's not."

I have to," he said. Frowning, he made his way along the paved walkway, paused as the façade and its fierce serpent-snouts emerged in sight, caught his breath, plunged onward, waiting for the moment of vertigo, that sensation as of a highly localized earthquake. Nothing. He looked back. Celia, pale, grim, arms folded, was staring at him. Hilgard returned and tried it again. "Maybe I was just six inches off that time. A

little to the left —” Nothing. Nothing the third time, or the fourth. A few other tourists passed by, staring oddly at him. Back and forth he went, covering every inch. The pathway was narrow; there were only a few possible routes. He felt no vertigo. No gateway in space opened for him. He did not tumble through into his rightful world.

“Please, Ted. Enough.”

“Once more.”

“This is embarrassing. You look so damned obsessive.”

“I want to go where I belong,” Hilgard said.

Back and forth. Back and forth. He was beginning to feel embarrassed too. Perhaps she was right: this was mere madness that had possessed his soul. There are no gateways. He could not walk back and forth in front of those horrendous stone faces all afternoon. “Once more,” he said, and nothing happened, and he turned away. “It doesn’t work,” he told her. “Or else it works only when one’s counterpart is passing through it at the same instant. And that would be impossible to arrange. If I could send him a message — tie it to a rock, toss it through the gateway, tell him to be here tomorrow at nine sharp—”

“Let’s go,” Celia said.

“All right. Yes.” Defeated, dejected, he let her lead him across the dry hot temple courtyard to the waiting taxi. They returned to Mexico City in the full madness of the evening rush hour, saying little to each other. Their hotel room turned out to have two single beds instead of a double. Just as well, Hilgard thought. He felt an immense airless distance between himself and this woman who believed she was his wife. They had a bleak dinner at a Zona Rosa restaurant and went to sleep early, and before daybreak they were up and out and on their way to the airport.

“Maybe when you’re in your own home,” she said, “you’ll begin to get pieces of your memory back.”

“Maybe,” he said.

But the co-op on East 85th meant nothing to him. It was a handsome apartment, thirty stories up, obviously worth a fortune, and it was furnished beautifully, but it was someone else’s house, with someone else’s books and clothes and treasures in it. The books included a good many that he also owned, and the clothes fit him, and some of the paintings and primitive artifacts were quite in accordance with his own taste. It was like being in one’s twin brother’s home, perhaps. But he wandered helplessly and in growing panic from room to room, wondering where his files were, his little hoard of boyhood things, his first editions, his Peruvian pottery collection. Delusions? Phantom memories of a nonexistent life? He was cut off from everything that he thought to be real, and it terrified him. The Manhattan phone book listed no Theodore Hilgard on Third Avenue, and no Hilgard Galleries, either. The Universe had swallowed that Ted Hilgard.

"I phoned Judith," Celia said, "and told her something of what happened. She wants to see you first thing tomorrow."

He had been to Judith's Rockefeller University office often enough, just a few blocks east of his gallery. But this was a different Judith and her office was at New York Medical, uptown at the edge of Spanish Harlem. Hilgard walked over to Fifth and caught a bus, wondering if he had to pay his fare with some sort of token in this world, wondering if the Metropolitan Museum was where he remembered it, wondering about Judith. He negotiated the bus problem without difficulty. The gray bulk of the museum still crouched on the flank of Central Park. Upper Fifth Avenue looked more or less untransformed, the Frick Collection building just as dignified as ever, the Guggenheim spiral just as peculiar as ever. And Judith was untransformed also: elegant, beautiful, warm with the light of that wonderful intelligence gleaming in her eyes. The only thing missing was that certain mischievous sparkle, that subliminal aura of shared intimacies, that acknowledged that they had long been lovers. She greeted him as a friend and nothing more than a friend.

"What in God's name has been going on with you?" she asked at once.

He smiled ruefully. "Between one moment and the next I seem to have had a total identity transplant. I used to be a bachelor with an art gallery down the block from Bloomingdale's. Now I'm a married man with a marketing research company on 57th Street. And so on. A burst of dizziness at the ruins of Teotihuacan and everything in my life got switched around."

"You don't remember Celia?"

"It isn't just amnesia, if that's where you're heading. I don't remember Celia or anything else having to do with my life here. But I *do* remember a million other things that don't seem to exist any more, a complete reality substructure: phone numbers, addresses, biographical details. You, for instance. The Judith I know is with Rockefeller University. She's single, and lives at 382 East 61st Street and her phone number is — you see what I mean? As a matter of fact, you may be the only link between my old life and this one. Somehow I got to know you in both identities. Figure the odds against that."

Judith looked at him with intense, somber concern. "We'll arrange a full battery of neurological tests right away. This sounds like the damndest mental short-circuit I've ever heard of, though I suspect I'll turn up some similar cases in the literature. People who experienced sudden drastic dissociative reactions leading to complete disruption of personality patterns."

"Some sort of schizoid break, is that what you're saying?"

"We don't use terms like schizophrenia or paranoia much any more, Ted. They've been corrupted by popular misconceptions, and they're too imprecise anyway. We know now that the brain is an enormously com-

plex instrument that has capabilities far beyond our rational understanding — I mean freakish stuff like being able to multiply ten-digit numbers in your head — and it's entirely possible that given the right stimulus it can manufacture a perfectly consistent surrogate identity, which —"

"In layman's terms, I'm crazy."

"If you want to use layman's terms," Judith said, "you're suffering from delusions of an extraordinarily vivid kind."

Hilgard nodded. "Among those delusions, you should know, is that you and I were lovers for the past four years."

She smiled. "I'm not at all surprised. You've been carrying on a lovely little flirtation with me from the moment we met."

"Have we ever been to bed together?"

"Of course not, Ted."

"Have I ever seen you naked?"

"Not unless you've been spying on me."

He wondered how much this Judith differed from his. Risking it, he said, "Then how do I know you have a small surgical scar on your left breast?"

Shrugging, she said, "I had a little benign tumor removed years ago. Celia might have mentioned that to you."

"And I'd know which breast?"

"You might."

"I can tell you six or seven other things about your body that only somebody who's plenty familiar with it would know. I can tell you what your favorite lovemaking position is, and why. I can imitate the sound you make at your climax."

"Oh? Can you?"

"Listen," he said, and did his best to duplicate that strange whining passionate cry he had heard so many times. Judith's playful, challenging smile disappeared. Her lips grew taut and her eyes narrow and splotches of color came to her cheeks. She glanced away from him.

Hilgard said, "I didn't have a tape recorder under your bed. I haven't been discussing your sexual idiosyncrasies with Ron. I wouldn't even know Ron if I tripped over him in the street. And I'm not reading your mind. How do I know all these things, then?"

She was silent. She moved papers about randomly on her desk. Her hands appeared to be shaking.

"Maybe you're the one with dissociative reactions," he said. "You've forgotten all about our affair."

"You know that's nonsense."

"You're right. Because the Judith Rose I've been to bed with is at Rockefeller University. But I've been to bed with a Judith Rose, who's very much like you. Do you doubt that now?"

She made no reply. She was staring at him in an astounded way, and

there seemed to be something else in her look, a volatility, an excitement, that led him to think he had somehow reached across the barrier of his lost world to touch her, *this* Judith, to arouse her and kindle in her some simulacrum of the love and passion that he knew they had had in another existence. A sudden wild fantasy erupted in him: getting free of Celia, getting Judith free of Ron, and reconstructing in this unfamiliar world the relationship that had been taken from him. But the idea faded as quickly as it had come. It was foolishness; it was nonsense; it was an impossibility.

She said finally, "Describe what you think happened to you?"

He told her in all the detail he could muster: the vertigo, the feeling of passing through a gateway, the gradual discovery of the wrongness of everything. "I want to believe this is all just a mental illness and that six lithium pills will make everything be right again. But I don't think that's how it is. I think what happened to me may be a lot wilder than a mere schizoid break. But I don't want to believe that. I want to think it's just a dissociative reaction."

"Yes. I'm sure you do."

"What do you think it is, Judith?"

"My opinion doesn't matter, does it? What matters is proof."

"Proof?"

She said, "What were you carrying on you when you experienced your moment of vertigo?"

"My camera." He thought. "And my wallet."

"Which had credit cards, driver's license, all that stuff?"

"Yes," he said, beginning to understand. He felt a stab of fear, cold, intense. Pulling his wallet out, he said, "I haven't even thought of looking at the things in my pocket. But here — here —" He drew forth his driver's license. It had the Third Avenue address. He took out his Diner's Club card. Judith laid her own next to it. The cards were of different designs. He produced a twenty-dollar bill. She peered at the signatures on it and shook her head. Hilgard closed his eyes an instant and had a flashing vision of the Temple of Quetzalcoatl, the great heavy snouts of the serpents, the massive stone steps. Judith's face was dark and grim, and Hilgard knew she had forced him to confront the final proof, and he had a sense of a mighty gate swinging shut forever behind him. He was not the victim of any psychosis. He had actually made the crossing, and it was irrevocable. His other life was gone — it was dead. Bitterly he said, "I forged all this stuff, right? While I was down in Mexico City I had it all printed up, counterfeit money, a fake driver's license, to make the hoax look really convincing. Right? Right?" He remembered something else, and went burrowing for it in his wallet, and found it after a frantic search: Judith's own business card, with *Department of Neurobiology, Rockefeller University* on it in shining engraved letters. The card was old and worn

and creased. She looked at it as though he had put a basilisk in her hand. When she stared at him again, it was with a sad and tender look of pity.

At length she said, "Ted, I'll give you all the help I can."

"What kind of help?"

"Making the adaptation. Learning your role here. Celia and I, between us, ought to be able to fill you in on who you're supposed to be. It's the only thing I can imagine doing now. You're right that lithium won't fix anything."

"No," Hilgard said. "Don't involve Celia."

"We have to."

"No," he said. "She thinks I'm her husband and that I'm suffering from an unfortunate dissociative reaction, or whatever you called it. If she comes to realize I'm the complete stranger I've been insisting I am, I'm lost. She'll throw me out and try to find ways of getting *him* back. And I have no way to function in this world except in the identity of Theodore Hilgard."

"You *are* Theodore Hilgard."

"Yes, and I intend to go on being him. Doing marketing research and living with Celia and signing my name to checks. You'll help me adapt, yes. You'll have a couple of sessions of therapy with me every week, and you'll tell me where I went to college and what the names of my friends are and who the Presidents have been in this world, if they have Presidents here. So far as everyone else will know, you're helping me recover from a mysterious mental fog. You won't tell a soul that I don't belong here. And sooner or later I *will* belong here. All right, Judith? You see, I've got no choice. There's no way for me to get back across the barrier. I've managed to prove to one other human being that I'm not crazy, and now I've got to put that behind me and start living the life I've been handed. Will you help me?"

"One condition," she said.

"Which is?"

"You're in love with me. I see that, and I don't blame you, because I know you can't help thinking I'm *your* Judith. I'm not. I'm Ron's. Go on flirting with me, go on having fantasies about me, but don't give me any moves, ever. All right? Because you might open up in me something that I don't want opened, do you understand? We remain *friends*. Co-conspirators, even. That's all. Is that agreed?"

Hilgard looked at her unhappily. It was a long while before he could bring himself to say it.

"Agreed," he told her at last.

Celia said, "Judith phoned while you were on the way back. She talked to me for twenty minutes. Oh, Ted — my poor Ted —"

"I'm going to be okay. It'll take time."

"She says these amnesias, these detailed delusions, are extraordinarily rare. You're going to be a textbook case."

"Wonderful. I'm going to need a lot of help from you, Celia."

"Whatever I can do."

"I'm a blank. I don't know who our friends are, I don't know how to practice my profession, I don't even know who *you* are. Everything's wiped out. I'll have to rebuild it all. Judith will do as much as she can, but the real burden, day by day, hour by hour, is going to fall on you."

"I'm prepared for that."

"Then we'll start all over, from scratch. We'll make a go of it. Tonight we'll eat at one of our special restaurants — you'll have to tell me which our special restaurants are — and we'll have the best wine in the house, or maybe a bottle or two of champagne, and then we'll come back here — we'll be like newlyweds, Celia, it'll be like a wedding night. All right?"

"Of course," she said softly.

"And then tomorrow the hard work begins. Fitting me back into the real world."

"Everything will come back, Ted. Don't worry. And I'll give you all the help you need. I love you, Ted. No matter what's happened to you, that hasn't changed. I love you."

He nodded. He took her hands in his. Falteringly, guiltily, with a thick tongue and a numbed heart he forced himself to get the words out, the words that were his only salvation now, the words that gave him his one foothold on the shores of an unknown continent. "And I love you, Celia," he told the absolute stranger who was his wife.

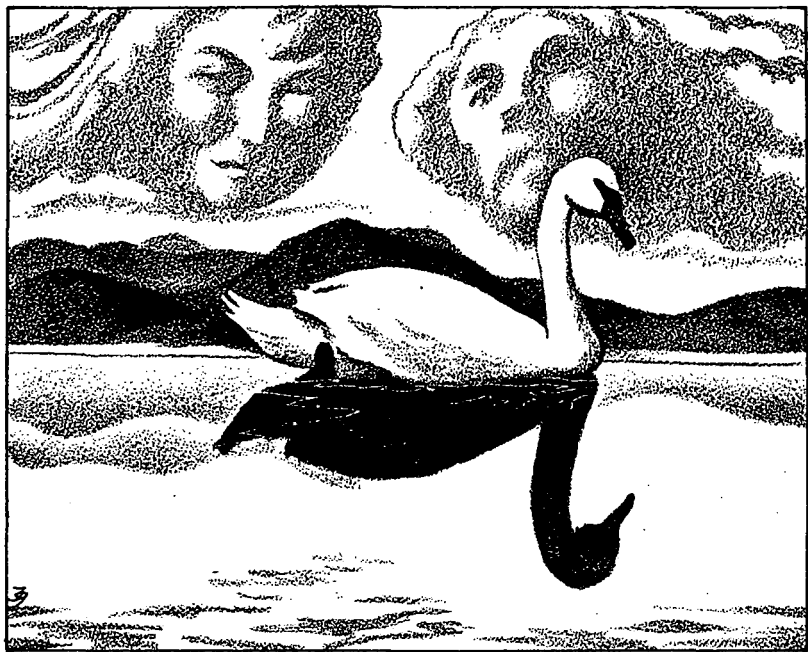
Robert Silverberg is one of the major figures in contemporary science fiction. He is the author of, among many others, Dying Inside, Downward to the Earth, Tower of Glass, A Time of Changes, and — more recently — Lord Valentine's Castle and Majipoor Chronicles. He has won an assortment of Hugo and Nebula awards, and has been a contributor to Amazing, off and on, since the 1950s.

The author has visited Mexico many times; and a number of the events in this story actually happened to him, although, as he added, "a good many of them didn't."

THE CRIPPLED SWAN

by Nancy Springer

art: Jack Gaughan



Nancy Springer is the author of three fantasy novels, The White Hart, The Silver Sun, and The Sable Moon, all published by Pocket Books. A fourth, The Black Beast, will be out from Pocket at about the time you read these words. It deals with an angry prince; a sacred kingship; and hereditary madness in Vale, the same imaginary land in which "The Crippled Swan" is set.

The author lives in Windber, Pennsylvania. She is a Phi Beta Kappa graduate of Gettysburg College; a member of the Science Fiction Writers of America; Poets & Writers, Inc.; and the Author's Guild. She claims a hobby of artistic rubber stamps, and decorates her letters with several which — alas — we cannot reproduce here.

I am Eala, the goddess of the many names, she whom men call Vieyra and Adalis, Morgoth and Mylitta, maiden, mother, and hag, goddess of Vale. And my consort is Feridun, he who was god and first man, first Sacred King and ruler with me as King of the Dead in Acheron. Many are the ages of men that have passed in Vale since first we fashioned it out of the blood and bones of the ancient dragons. But still the Sacred Kings rule, and I will tell you why.

"How the Kings have dwindled," Feridun grumbled to me as we talked of the days gone by. "They are scarcely of stature beyond ordinary men, and their valor is hollow, for there is no wisdom in them. Aiden and Aymar and Tirell; all the great ones are gone long ago. This Aggrivar now, what good is in him? He cannot even cast seed in a woman."

We sat and focused our thought on Aggrivar, studying him, until we saw his doings as clearly as if he were standing on the grass before us.

"My line should end with him," said Feridun morosely. "His honor is all in seeming. Some of the canton Kings are more fit to rule than he. But yet — can there be no shred of my wisdom left in him, even after all these years?"

"I shall set him a puzzle," I proposed. "If he guesses it aright, the sacred Kings of Feridun's lineage shall flourish anew. If not, let men's strivings move to what end they will. 'Twill make a fine play."

"Even so," Feridun assented.

So I went by night, in form of a raven, to where Queen Sadar my handmaiden lay in her perfumed bed, and I made shift to cast in her good seed of a peculiar sort while she sighed amidst her dreams. For I am Eala who can take many forms, even male forms. Then before dawn I winged my way back to Feridun, and we sat on our grass and watched from afar.

Now this was in the twentieth year of the reign of King Aggrivar. He had married three times in search of an heir, and his vassals were grumbling. So he trembled where he stood outside the chamber door while his young Queen Sadar gave birth at last. The baby was a boy, fair of skin and with fine, regular features like a dream child. He came headfirst from the womb, and around his neck was a long chain of bright gold. The maid blinked twice and wiped him off and brought him to his father.

"Truly, this is one whom the gods have blessed!" said the King in a hushed voice.

"There is more yet to come in her womb," the woman told him.

The second baby was a twin to the first, as delicate of feature, but dark of skin. He came feet first from the womb, and around his neck was a fair silver chain. But the King frowned when he saw him.

"This one is evil," he said. "Take him to the mountains and leave him there to die."

"He has botched it!" Feridun groaned, and I smiled.

It was done as the King said. The woman and some retainers brought the dark babe to the rocky slopes of the first mountain of Acheron. They laid him down, naked except for his silver chain, and they hastened away, for they knew that this was my realm. Most of those who venture here are ready to go to Feridun. Indeed Aggrivar's servants fled only to the death he had prepared for them, and I directed them on the way. But sometimes I choose to do differently, and so it was that the mother-goddess, Adalis, went to her dark-skinned child and gathered him up.

Pretty young Queen Sadar knew nothing of all this, for she was drugged. When she awoke her maidservants gave her the fair baby with his golden chain, and she was full of joy. The boy was named Mylos Aggrivar Aymar, after his fathers. But Sadar always called him Doray, that is to say, Golden.

Doray grew into a child who was marvelously fair, but strange to all around him. He was distant and fey, even from his earliest years, as if human warmth was not in him. He was more like a captured spirit of air and spaces than like a mortal boy. One day when he was four years old he tore loose from his nurse's hand, ran and flung himself over the castle wall. Halfway down he smashed against a buttress, and then the guards below broke his fall. His right arm and shoulder were badly mangled by the blow. "I was only trying to fly!" he answered to his mother's sobbing reproach.

Doray healed, but crookedly, so that he no longer had grace or proper use of his right arm and hand. Then gradually, over a period of years, the royal vassals turned against his father and him. "We will have no crippled madman on the sacred throne," they muttered, at first secretly and then aloud. "A crippled hand is not fit to hold the scepter of Eala or the sword of Morgoth." King Aggrivar kept his throne for a long time, at first by subtlety and later by force. Finally war came, and in time he was killed on a distant battlefield. The canton kings marched together towards his castle along the river Chardri.

Doray was fifteen years old, and no more eager to be a king than his royal vassals were to have him. When he heard of his father's death he took the best horse in the stables and left, letting his mother fend for herself however she could. He rode toward my dark mountains of Acheron that loomed in the west. I suppose he deemed that no one would follow him there, or perhaps he felt a call; I do not know. Even we gods could not know him entirely. We watched as he struggled through the creeping, stooping forest of the foothills, and up the barren slopes above, until he had to leave his horse and climb one-armed along the ledges of the rocky peaks. All the time he was not looking for anything that he had ever known.

At last he found a high hidden passage between the peaks, like a slot cut through the mountains, and he crossed to the other side. But there he

found nothing except a dark green hollow and a flat shadowy lake. This was my realm, the realm of death and timeless vision. Nothing stirred within this place, not even a breeze in the long fronds of the gnarled trees that stooped over the water. The lake was as still as polished stone. Doray stared for a moment, and then walked towards the water. He knelt to drink, cupping his one good hand.

The moment he touched the water he turned into a great white swan, for he was of godly seed. Joy filled him. He floated away, singing, into the middle of the lake. But his right wing hung uselessly, dragging in the water, and he knew that still he could not fly.

He floated motionless, and the ripples of his passing smoothed away, until the surface of the lake was like a mirror.

Doray saw his reflection in the water. He knew that he was a fair white swan, but it was a black swan that stared back at him, with a silver chain flowing from its neck.

"Who are you?" Doray whispered.

"I am Arget," the other replied, "your brother, whom you have never known. Search for me."

"But how are you my brother, you who are black?" Doray cried.

"Search for me," Arget sighed.

"But where?"

"Search for me," Arget told him a third time, and then a sudden strong wind blew through that still place. Whence came that wind? I do not know; even we gods do not know all.

The image in the water vanished and Doray hurried to the shore. In a moment he was himself once again in human form, shivering on a shadowy lawn beside a still lake.

Behind him were the mountains he had traversed. Before him were mountains again, the very twins of the ones he had left behind. He went on again, and the creeping forests were his fear, the barren slopes were his despair, the rocky peaks were his mortality. Feridun and I watched in wonder as this human speck went on. In time Doray came to the same slotted defile, and groaned and passed through. Within was a green and sunny lawn, warm beneath a blue bubble of sky, and in the midst of that warm hollow a youth lay sleeping. Doray stood and looked upon himself in twilight mode, with a chain of moonlight silver around his neck.

Very slowly he knelt beside the sleeper, wondering what his welcome would be. With his one good hand he reached and touched a hand that lay limp upon the grass. Arget stirred and blinked and opened his warm dark eyes. Only an instant he stared, and then he cried out and reached for his brother with both good arms, stretching and yearning for him like a child. Doray lifted him in an awkward embrace, and some strange new feeling came to him. He wept.

There was food in the meadow; I saw to that. Arget and Doray ate, and

slept, and ate again. Then they took what they needed and left. All the time they talked, learning as children learn in their earliest years. Doray spoke of butterflies and all bright skylit things, and Arget told of the shy dappled deer and shadowy panthers and other secret things that move about in the dark of night. Flight and love, sunlight and sorrow, they talked until the paradox of fair spirit and darker mood was manifest to them both.

They came at last to the still lake, my lake of vision, in the shadowy hollow where no breeze moves, and they stood together on the shore. They embraced each other wordlessly, joined hands and strode into the water. Instantly a great white swan floated on the dark lake, and its reflection in the water shone white as clouds.

"Arget?" Doray cried.

"I am here," the reflection told him, "one with you, as I should be. Look, you are healed."

It was so. The right wing no longer drooped into the water; it was well and sound.

"You can fly now," Arget said from the shimmering surface of the lake.

"He will come to us now!" Feridun whispered excitedly.

"Some day, maybe," Doray said slowly. "Not right now. . . ." He swam to the shore. As he set foot on the verge he was once more himself in human form, but now entire, Doray and Arget, with two strong and supple arms. Around his neck hung a long chain of silver and one of gold.

Eagerly, urgently, he strode back towards the land he had so eagerly left. Through the slotted passage he went, and down the rocky pinnacles and the barren slopes and into the forest of shadowy clutching trees. Among the trees he met a woman he knew. She was older than he remembered her, and in rags. Much had befallen Queen Sadar, some good and some bad, but that is another play. . . . She scarcely looked up from the rocky grounds as she trudged up her own mountain of desperation.

"Mother!"

She looked up then, and gaped, and trembled. "Doray?" she whispered hesitantly.

"Nay," he said slowly. "It is Mylos Aggrivar Aymar, all of me." He embraced her, as he had never embraced her in all of his life, and she wept in his arms.

"Long are the years since you went, and unkind," she said. "But I see now that all is well. You have grown."

Indeed he was a strong young man. "It seems only a season's passing, or less," he answered, puzzled. "Yet you are no queen now."

"Nay, I am only blessed to be alive, though I would not have said so a few moments ago. . . . A renegade king now sits on your father's throne."

"Does it matter?" Mylos wanted to know.

Sadar stared at him, and suddenly she laughed a joyful, winging laugh. "Nay! He rules as well as your father ever did, perhaps better. His mercy gives me life this day."

"Then let us go," Mylos said, "and find a bit of sunny land, and grow some corn. These will keep us in food for a while." He took from his neck the two long chains of silver and gold. But his mother still stared at him.

"Yet you are so lovely," she said slowly, "like a dream, or the get of the gods. Will you not be a king then, or a priest, or something great? For what were you born, Mylos, that we have both come to this strange path?"

"For the sport of the gods," he answered quietly. "And I'll be no king for their pleasure."

"He has guessed it!" Feridun exclaimed.

"Who watches the gods, I wonder?" Mylos smiled. "The birds and other creatures are born and live their lives and die as we watch. We laugh and marvel and go our ways while the gods watch us and laugh. Perhaps they marvel too. . . . But who watches the gods?"

Sadar looked at him uncertainly and then laughed again, the same free, soaring laugh. "No matter! Let us go and plant some corn, and I can weave cloth. By all that is lovely, I haven't done it since you were a little boy!" She took Mylos by his good right arm, and together they walked down the mountain, out of the forest to the fertile land.

"We can't have this!" Feridun gasped. "Why, the fellow is the wisest heir of all my line!"

"Such smug contentment and guessing of riddles!" I agreed. "Nay indeed, he cannot be left alone. If men refuse to strive, how is our play to go on? But let me think a moment, how he is to be managed."

It was not easy. But in time, and with many devices, I won him to the usages of power. He became king, a wise and just king, and his heirs rule in Vale to this day. And that is why the Sacred Kings still hold sway over that land: because Mylos Aggrivar Aymar could have flown, but chose to walk to his mortal doom.

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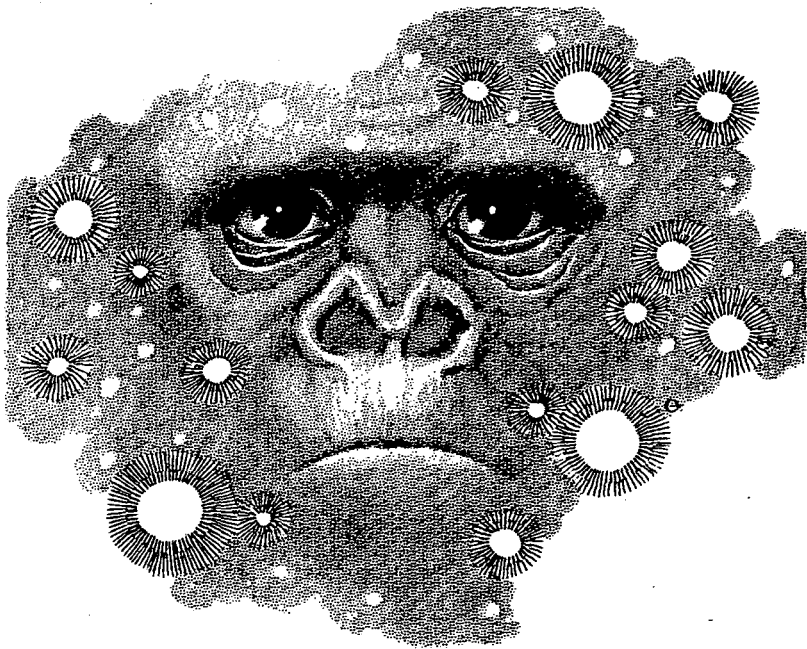
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THRESHOLD

by Sharon Webb

art: George Barr



Sharon Webb lives in Georgia, in a Blue Ridge valley nestled between Blood and Slaughter Mountains. In this sanguine setting she writes full time. A former cardiac-care nurse, she has written a non-fiction book about nursing school, RN (Zebra Books), plus about twenty-five science-fiction stories which have been published in various places. Her first novel, Earthchild, is being published by Atheneum; it had its genesis with the novelet, "Variation on a Theme from Beethoven."

Me not hurt rabbit. Me not. Kodi love rabbit.

When the phone rang, she knew it was her mother. It wasn't telepathy; it was her mother's unerring sense of timing. Sighing, she plopped the "who-dunnit" face down on its red herring, reached for her glass of sherry with one hand and the telephone with the other.

"Jean?" chirped the voice on the other end.

Who else? "Hello, Mother." She slid her toes a tad closer to the fire. "I thought it was you."

"You always say that, dear. Doesn't anyone else ever call?"

"Not much."

"What were you doing?"

"Reading."

A faint sigh blew over the receiver. "Why don't you try and get out more, dear? See some young men. Go to a dance."

"I'll think about it, Mother." A swallow of the Oloroso rolled warmly down her throat. "I really will."

Another sigh with a slight increase in volume — "Your father and I worry about you so. I never know what to say to my friends. Just today Hannah asked about you. 'How's your darling Jean?' she said. Her Martha is pregnant with her second, you know. So what can I say to her? 'She's fine. Just fine. Who could ask for more? All day long she trains monkeys. At night she reads.'"

"Kodi isn't a monkey, Mother."

"Monkeys, apes — What's the difference?"

"Quite a bit, Mother." But it wasn't any use. Her mother had a convenient mind with its own unique logic. Mrs. Greenfield was incapable of imagining her daughter working in a primate center with a gorilla. "This is what you went to college for? To be torn limb-from-limb? By a King Kong?" After the initial trauma, she'd totally repressed the idea. The "slaving, breast-beating beast" disappeared into a little crease in Mrs. Greenfield's brain to be forever replaced by a small brown rhesus with long tail and dirty habits.

Her mother's voice went on, "God permitting, if you should ever have a child of your own, if you ever give me a grandchild, you'll know what worry is."

But she did have a child: Kodi.

You dirty bad stink. Me not hurt rabbit. Me not.

A chill gust of wind whipped the rickety door out of Jean's hand as she tried to close it. Groaning hinges tugged at their fastenings.

A cheery voice said, "If that grant doesn't come through, we may have to hang up animal skins to keep out the weather."

Jean pushed the door shut and looked up to see Marian Whitmore who worked with the newest addition at the center, Tic Toc, who was eight months old. "I'm afraid you're right. How's Tic Toc?"

"Adorable. He sits around all day with his thumb in his mouth, but I have high hopes." Marian breezed off down the hall, then turned and said over her shoulder, "The boss is off to an early start. He's working with your Kodi now."

"I wonder why?" But Marian was gone. Jean walked down the wide, shabby hall past the communal room where the apes were allowed to gather and play together occasionally, and entered the large high-ceilinged room partially filled with sturdy second-hand furniture that doubled as Kodi's enclosure and Jean's office.

David Copeland, all angles and bones inside his clothes, sat cross-legged on the floor. His hands moved rapidly in sign. Kodi answered in Ameslan, leathery fingers moving through the words. Then she turned her face away and offered the back of her hand in a conciliatory gesture.

"She's lying again," he said to Jean.

Jean hung her coat in her locker, replacing it with a lab jacket. "What about?"

"Look over there."

She followed his gaze to the rabbit cage, bars bent in a neat parenthesis. "Oh, no." The white rabbit lay motionless, its neck at an acute angle. "Kodi?"

He nodded. "I think she pulled the rabbit out to play with it. After she broke its neck, she stuffed it back in the cage."

Kodi was listening intently to the conversation, trying to piece its meaning together.

David turned to the young gorilla and signed, "You hurt the rabbit. You made the rabbit die."

Kodi sat back on her heels, confused. *Me not hurt rabbit. Rabbit not cry.*

"She doesn't understand 'die'." Jean felt a quick flash of pity for the confused animal. "She hasn't learned that word."

"She's going to now. I can't miss this opportunity."

"Opportunity?"

"Of course. We're going to find out what the concept of death means to a primate. How she reacts to it."

Jean watched him manipulate Kodi's fingers into the position for "die." He repeated the word over and over, emphasizing the sign, shaping Kodi's motions.

Die. Die. Die.

Poor mutt. Let's teach her what death is. And guilt. And all the other nasty things that humans wallow in.

Kodi's brow furrowed in concentration lines as she listened and watched intently.

Jean felt a slow fire of resentment smoulder. Damn David anyway. Damn him and his miserable rabbit experiment. Suspicion rose. Maybe he'd never been that interested at all in the reactions of the isolated apes to other species. If that scheme were only a way to beef up interest in the project and generate extra funding, how much more lucrative might this wrinkle be? The more she thought about it, the more convinced she was. When he'd ensconced the rabbit cage in Kodi's room, what had he expected? Really? Surely he had common sense enough to know that Kodi would want to touch the rabbit like any kid with a new toy.

Like any kid — And there she was, anthropomorphizing again. The cardinal sin in Copeland's Breviary. But dammit, where was the line anyway? Where had the prehuman crossed over the line into humanity? Use of tools? Nonsense. Lots of animals used tools; all the primates did. Language? Symbols? Abstract reasoning? Kodi used them all. All the Ameslaners did, and Kodi was second generation, the smartest of the lot. And yet, anthropomorphic fantasies aside, Kodi was beast — and her baby.

Ever since that day when David handed her a little wooly infant who grasped her hair with one hand and her blouse with another and snuggled to her breast with lonesome whimpers, she'd been hooked. She had coped with Kodi and with David for nearly eleven years. And in a strange way they were a family.

She'd nearly blown it too. Even today she couldn't forget her first meeting with David. She had breezed into his office for her interview, fresh BS in hand and visions of research grants and advanced degrees dancing in her head. "Hi. You Tarzan. Me Jean." She cringed at the memory. But how could she have known then that David Copeland was the most serious contender for the Humorless Man Award since Cotton Mather?

There he sat, single-mindedly manipulating Kodi's fingers, ignoring the confusion in the big beast's eyes.

Die. Die. Die.

Rabbit die.

"I'm only thinking of you, Jean," said the chirping telephone voice. "You know how I worry."

"I know, Mother."

"If I didn't love you, Jean, I wouldn't say these things to you."

"I know." And she did know. Her mother was trying to protect her, trying to shelter her from Bleak Old Age. She was trying to surround her with a husband and a flock of children because she saw it as better so. Hadn't it always been better so? Her mother was holding a set of values up that reflected like a carnival mirror onto her own, turning them into

grotesques.

She knew her mother loved her. But why, God, why did it have to hurt so damned much?

Rabbit not eat. Rabbit not move. Rabbit die. Bad.

"Kodi?"

Kodi sat facing the corner in the traditional place for punishment. She stared at the blank wall and absently passed her wooly hand over her face in the Ameslan sign for "bad."

Poor beastie. All she needed was a dunce cap to make the picture complete. "Kodi? Why are you sitting in the corner?" Jean knelt beside the animal and touched her on the shoulder.

Kodi's eyes did not meet hers.

"Kodi?"

Slowly, Kodi's hands moved in sign: *Rabbit die. Kodi make rabbit die. Kodi bad.*

So David had succeeded. Blast his soul. Jean rubbed the nape of a wooly neck. "It's all right, Kodi. It's all right. I'll make it all right," she said, knowing that the ape caught only a few of the whispered words, knowing too that the sound of her voice was soothing. She took Kodi's face in both hands and turned it toward her. "Want Jean to tickle Kodi?" It was an irresistible invitation.

The big sad eyes searched her face, the long fingers moved: *Please, Jean, tickle Kodi.*

And for awhile, it helped.

"I'm worried about Kodi."

"Who? Oh, that monkey of yours," said the voice on the line with a mixture of exasperation and amusement. Her mother neatly bent the conversation into a U-turn. "I wish you'd show a little concern for some of the important things, Jean."

"Like what, Mother?"

"Do you know what your poor father said to me last night? He said, 'Jean is the last, Momma. The last Greenfield. She's the end of the line.'"

"Well, I guess you should have had a boy, Mother." She knew before the words were out that it was the wrong thing to say.

"A boy! God forbid I should have another one driving nails into my coffin."

"I'm not driving nails, Mother. Listen, I really have to go. I have a lot of work to do, a paper to write—"

"Monkey business. Always the monkey business—"

There was more, but Jean turned it off as neatly as a tap. After a

minute she quietly said, "Goodbye, Mother," and hung up the receiver.

She had never understood why people put such great store on the survival of the family name. She couldn't carry on that family name unless she married and refused to take her husband's name. Or, while she was thinking about defying convention, she could entertain the notion of having a bastard. And wouldn't Mother love that?

What did the family name represent anyway except a diluted gene pool that got more watered down with each passing generation? Did it really matter whether or not the pool dried up with her? "Of course not," she said aloud, startling herself with the intensity of her voice, startling herself even more with the knowledge that what she said had all the trappings of a lie. Because, somehow, put that way, it did seem to matter — as if the saying of it made her living and her dying more final.

Final. And when it was all over and done with, what would be left to show she'd made the trip? A half-dozen articles. Sixteen-going-on-seventeen loose-leaf notebooks crammed with compact notes, and the written Ameslan notation she and David had developed for Kodi and the other apes.

Her work had always seemed important before.

She reached for her bottle of sherry, found it empty, and lit a cigarette. Wasn't that what mothers were for? To make you hold up your life and find it a little frayed at the seams? Ready for the rag bag. To make you ask, "why?" and "is that all?" To boil everything you are down to sixteen-going-on-seventeen notebooks?

When you got right down to it, Kodi had nearly as much to show for her simian existence. Jean had a notebook nearly full of the ape's typings: pages of the curls and squiggles that were the type-written mimics of Ameslan signs that she had so painstakingly developed and taught to Kodi.

She thumbed through the collection of Kodi's typings, reading the curls and hooks as easily as English. *Me Kodi.* said the first page, the fifth, the tenth. *Me Kodi.*

"You Kodi, me Jean," she said to herself, reflecting, wondering how she could define herself without Kodi, without that notebook. She flipped slowly through the pages. Page twenty-nine: *Me hungry. Me eat now.* Page forty-two: *Me hurt here.* Neither written Ameslan nor dry English notes could express the pain in Kodi's eyes that day, nor the anguish in hers as they waited for the vet's hurried visit. Page seventy-eight: A change here. Kodi was older, better able to use language. *Sweet. Eat. Eat sweet. Sweet eat.* She remembered the delight over that page, the amazement that the ape had translated sound to sign. "Kodi. You made a rhyme." And on the following pages, the repetitions of that rhyme and others — Kodi's delight over language as a toy. She turned the pages — a fib here, a game there. Fears, hurts, wants.

"There's your life, Kodi," she said closing the notebook, laying it beside the stack of her notes and articles. "And there's mine."

She had done it in kindness, she told herself in retrospect. She had tried to spare Kodi the guilt over the rabbit, tried to ease the hurt. She had said it out of kindness — and ignorance and stupidity. She had said: "You're not bad, Kodi. Not bad. Everything dies, Kodi. Everything."

And she had gone to great lengths to explain it.

Chair die?

Only living things, Kodi. Rabbits and trees and people. Everything.

Me think Tic Toc die.

"Tic Toc, too. But not for a long time."

Kodi didn't greet her with the usual deep throaty purr. She lay on the floor, neck at an odd angle, in a caricature of the rabbit.

"Kodi?"

Kodi's hand passed slowly over her face and made the sign for "bad."

There was a single sentence on the Ameslan typer: *Me think Kodi die.*

She had done it in kindness . . . the kindness of a meddling mother. All night, unable to sleep, she lashed herself with the guilt of it. Finally she got up, dressed and went back to the center.

Kodi lay sleeping on the jumbled nest she had made in the corner, and there was something written on the Ameslan typer. The words kept blurring until Jean had to wipe her eyes with a wadded Kleenex. She stood there a long time, holding the note, watching the sleeping animal. The guilt was still there, but there was something else, something growing — a feeling of wonder.

She looked at the paper again. Had some prehuman in man's distant past stood on the threshold of humanity, thrust there by the knowledge of his own mortality? Did he ask then those questions that grew into the beginnings of philosophy and religion and science? Did he think these same thoughts:

Me think me die.

Me cry.

Why die?

Why?

THE INCOMPLEAT STRATEGIST

by John M. Ford

This will be, if the dice roll right, a regular column discussing games and game-related materials. Most will be new (or reasonably new) products, but there are no rules except that the game have a science-fiction or fantasy element.

The first point to be made is that criticism is critical, including pointing out flaws in a generally good product. You are welcome to disagree with anything I say, and please understand that a negative comment about a game you play is not an attack on your person.

Be further assured that the fact that this magazine is owned by a games publisher is not going to color my reviews of their products, and they in turn have no intention of trying to influence me. (Note, also, that this column has no connection with any other publication of Dragon Publishing or TSR Hobbies, Inc.; and a comment made to them may not reach me.)

If one of these reviews convinces you to buy a product — even to prove how wrong I was about something I criticized — tell the company where you read about it; that helps us all. (The same goes for products mentioned in our advertisements.) If you're a game publisher with a product you'd like reviewed, Editor Scithers can tell you where, and to whom, it should be sent.

And watch this space.

TOWARD A UNIFIED FIELD THEORY

Worlds of Wonder

The Chaosium, Inc., Box 6302,
Albany CA 94706-0302
Boxed set, \$16 (+\$2 postage/

handling)

Requires 4-, 6-, 8-, and 20-sided dice, included

Designers: see text

Back in the days, not altogether gone, when rôle-playing games were experimental and uncertain and rattled when you shook them, like breadboard circuits, I spent a lot of time and colored ink writing rules systems. It occurred to me more than once that, whether their setting is a sorcerous proto-Earth, the distant future, or mercenaries in a banana republic, at the core of all such rules are the same quantifications of people moving, acting, and fighting (and thinking, too, in a *good* ruleset). And the logical corollary to that idea is that if one designed a really functional system, it would apply equally well to any environment from Cro-Magnons with pointed sticks to Nth-Stage Lenspersons.

Now, this notion was implicit in several rulesets. *Traveller* from Game Designers' Workshop contains bows and swords and laser rifles, and rules for psionic powers that would make a fine magic system (in fact *better* than many explicitly fantasy games contain). Some of the "magic items" in the DUNGEONS & DRAGONS® game are direct analogues of high-tech artifacts (*pace* Dr. Clark's First Law). But no one has come out and done a ruleset specifically crossing the universal boundaries. Until now.

The *Boxed Worlds of Wonder* set contains four books, each of eighteen pages, with stiff covers: *Magic World*, *Future World*, and *Superworld*, which detail the rules specific to those envi-

ronments, and *Basic Role-Playing*, which is used with each of the others to form a complete ruleset. Characters from any "World" may travel to any other, after passing through a city called (appropriately enough) Wonder, which will change their currency and insure that not too much technology transfer takes place — no fair taking your +XXV Century laser tank into the Middle Ages. (The parallel with Michael Crichton's Delos or my own Altermities Corporation, before their respective system breakdowns, is interesting.) Presumably Wonder connects to other Worlds as well; the booklet format means that more environments, to suit many tastes, can be released at relatively low cost to publisher and buyer.

Basic Role-Playing (by Greg Stafford and Lynn Willis) is the same booklet included with the boxed *Runequest* game, and sold separately for \$4, now in its third edition. It establishes a movement-action system based on percentage probabilities of success, with those chances defined individually for each character in the game, rather than for characters by classes (5th-level Fighter, 8th-level Sewer Worker, etc.). *BRP* is actually a much stripped-down version of Chaosium's *Runequest*. It drops *RQ*'s elaborate system of locating weapons hits and distributing damage, and the Strike Rank system of sequencing actions; but it keeps the basic mechanics of attack and defense.

One party to the brawl attacks, using her skill percentage for the weapon she is using; the other person tries to parry the blow, with a shield, his weapon, or something improvised, such as a chair. It is quite possible to catch a blow on your sword — and have the sword snap in two. If the parry fails, some of the blow's force will be spent on the vic-

tim's armor — let's hope he's got some — and the rest gets through as physical damage.

It is possible to score a "critical hit" — defined as a blow that gets past armor protection. An "impaling hit" strikes deep into the body, for really awful damage — and the weapon is *stuck* there until extracted. And since luck is — forgive me, folks — a two-edged sword, there is the "fumble": drop weapon, hit friend, lose helmet, hit self, critical hit self, and other little mistakes that can ruin your whole day.

Now, one must note each character's attack and parry percentages with each weapon s/he has been trained with, and that can take quite a bit of note-keeping. But implementing the system is easy: one roll of the dice to attack, one for amount of damage (if any), one for parry chance. And the results are remarkably like the combats of swash-buckler movies (note I did *not* say "reality"!). The Musketeer can casually parry the Cardinal's Guardsman for whole minutes, the valiant sidekick can get an arrow stuck in his . . . er, flank, that requires the Quest be interrupted to find a healer, the mighty super-swordjock can trip and fall down, necessitating a daring escape from a real, chains-and-bars-type, dungeon.

This is, *I think*, the best system of hand-weapons combat available today. I did not say "most elaborate"; and I certainly did not say "most realistic" (which usually means "most complicated"). This is a value judgement, based on juggling dozens of combat tables over the years, and it will do no good to write nasty letters about how morally superior the "Gargoyles and Garderobes" combat system is.

Noncombat skills, such as climbing, jumping, and spotting concealed objects, are also assigned percentages — and one can also "critical" and "fum-

ble" a skill task such as leaping a crevasse; critical, and you land on your feet, ready for action — fumble, and . . . oh, you get the idea.

As I said before, these subsystems are simplified versions of those in *Runequest*. As a result, *RQ* becomes a useful — but optional — "higher authority"; the game operator can, if desired, use its more elaborate tables of weapons, the Strike Rank system, and the assorted minutiae rules that some people cannot live without.

Unfortunately, the Third Edition of *Basic Role-Playing* also preserves the fault of the earlier editions: it talks down. Not ruinously or offensively so, but after two revisions this point could have been fixed.

Magic World (by Steve Perrin) takes the medieval mayhem mechanics of *BRP* and adds magic spells and a short list of animals and "monsters." The spells list is thankfully short and practical, and contains nothing especially devastating; rules authors have begun to realize that super-wizards, who could incinerate armies with a gesture and a sneeze, did nothing for play balance. There are mentions, but no details, of more potent ritual magic (presumably another book is on the way); but ceremonial magic, with its props and chants, tends to be self-limiting. One can't set up an altar and call a dozen acolytes together just any old time, and besides, dark magic rituals are always being interrupted by hero-types with swords.

A short adventure for beginners is included (with the other books as well): poking around in caves, oh well. (At least the cave described makes sense as a place that might really exist.) However, this is about all the guidance the game operator gets toward creating her own adventures.

I am ambivalent as to whether this

is enough. The best place to learn what heroic fantasy is about remains, and *will* remain, fiction. A well-written story will teach more about dramatic unity, background, and the other storytelling elements — and never forget that rôle-play is a storytelling form — than ten times the length of rules, charts, and tables (all too often written by people who can't tell *Bash the Barbarian* from the *Odyssey*).

More simply put, it is the task of the ruleset to create possibilities, not exhaust them.

Future World (by Steve Perrin and Gordon Monson) moves the action to distant planets, adding ray guns, robots — but not spaceships; travel is by teleportation "gates" from world to world.

Characters gain beginning experience by entering one or a series of "career paths": join the Army, study science, turn criminal, and so forth. The system is not as much fun as *Traveller's* character sub-game, but it is easy to understand and quick to use.

Five nonhuman races are described, all balanced in abilities with humans, allowing a player to take the part of one without becoming suddenly superior or inferior to "its" human fellows. There are intelligent robots, and . . . here we go again . . . hive-mind insects, lizards, bears, and cats. Sure, it's hard to create an alien race that isn't just a Terrestrial animal with intelligence and tool use, but nobody said science fiction was an easy thing to write.

Characters can shoot at one another, with an assortment of projectile and energy weapons from hideout pistols to a shoulder-fired guided missile, toss grenades, and swing glowing energy swords. The list of weapons is manageable and rational, with some large and destructive weapons but no excesses

like pocket nukes.

There is also armor against all the weapons, in three types, each effective against one type of weapon (bullet, laser, or plasma), less so against the others. And there is the "tacpack," a computer-sensor-generator that can power one's weapons and put up defense screens against the other being's weapons. Screens come in three varieties too, plus electronic countermeasures to unguide missiles. Combat thus becomes a guessing game, as one tries to allocate limited energy to the right sort of protection. I'm not sure why it takes so long — six to twelve seconds — to switch screen type, or why the sensor technology postulated couldn't analyze incoming weapons and switch to suit, but the system is interesting and certainly adds tension to a battle.

The lack of spaceships may put some people off, but *Future World* functions well enough without them. (To be honest, teleportation is no more outrageous an assumption than faster-than-light drives.) Most adventure situations work as well in a city as aboard a spaceliner — cargo can be hijacked from trucks, too — and ship-to-ship combat, if presented in anything like a believable fashion, tends to get characters killed in numbers, or stranded a hundred miles up with no place to go. *More importantly*, the designers were not afraid to try something different, and that is an attitude I applaud.

But I do miss the spaceport bar.

Superworld (by Steve Perrin and Steve Henderson) makes the characters into comic-book heroes. (This is the current boom area in rôle-play rule-sets; there are now five major ones on the market.) A point system allows the "purchase" of powers, such as super-strength, invisibility, and lightning bolts from the fingertips; bonus points are

obtained for limitations and weaknesses to the powers — the need to say a magic word before becoming super, vulnerability to meteoric minerals, and so on.

The list of abilities is quite comprehensive; just about any hero or villain from the comics can be duplicated (except, of course, for the fact that "real" comics heroes always have just enough power to survive and defeat the villains; in the game, what your numbers say is what you are, and there's no Comics Code to assure the good guys will win).

Character creation requires a larger than average amount of care, partly because of this wide choice of super-powers. It isn't enough to shoot energy from the eyes; one must define what kind of energy, and in what intensity. There is also the question of consistency; nothing keeps a character from being a martial-arts expert who also throws fireballs, or a 40-foot giant with a 95% chance of Moving Quietly. A little creative discretion in designing logical combinations of powers and weaknesses is necessary. (I admit that, in many years as a game designer and operator, one of the strangest things I've ever had to ask a player is "Okay, now what weaknesses do you want?")

Even with care and study of the rules, the balance of powers and counter-powers is such that a group will probably have to play through a scenario or two before understanding how the system functions: how much armor is necessary, how many levels of attack powers and how much energy to run them, appropriate and excessive weaknesses.

The effects do seem to be worth the trouble, if you have any taste for comic books at all. Special rules make combat spectacular, even by gaming standards: characters get punched for yards (and through walls), take pot-shots in mid-

air with lasers and cold rays, use telekinesis to slam one another into ceilings.

The sample character sheets provide line drawings of heroically posed figures, two male and two female, for the player to embellish with his or her flashy costume design; a very nice idea, but the artwork is terrible.

There are some typos, too. The chance for a hero to hit something with his powerbolts was omitted (Chaosium has since said it is equal to the hero's Throwing percentage). The text does not always agree with the quick-reference tables. Chaosium does back up its products with errata sheets; one for *WW* should be available by the time you read this.

I can't really imagine running an extended campaign with these rules — how many times can costumed villains threaten the entire world before credibility totally collapses? — but *Superworld* makes a lively change of pace from hacking basilisks.

I started out by talking about universal systems. The *WW* sub-rules are compatible; whether you *want* to have costumed superheroes meet swordsmen, or sorcerers take on blaster-armed explorers, is very much a matter of taste, and not to be discussed here. However, given *first* that the rules all work — which these do — I think having the ability to cross over is better than not having it.

The strengths of *WW* are its simplicity and breadth of coverage. Its weakness is the shallowness of that coverage. In the long term, players will probably be more satisfied with a more complete single-environment game (such as *Traveller* for science fiction, *Runequest* or a version of the DUNGEONS & DRAGONS® game for fantasy). However, the “short term” can be many months of play — and

some persons never do develop a lasting interest. (Contrary to what some writers in the field have said, many intelligent and imaginative people do not care for the games, and conversely, being a rôle-player will not automatically make you a better human being.)

Worlds of Wonder best recommends itself to the game operator of some experience, whose players have little or none — novices who haven't decided what style of game suits them, and aren't ready for masses of rules and tables. Even where *WW* is sketchy, it is not completely void on important subjects; there is a framework for *ad hoc* rulings. I suspect that, as more booklets are released, this will be a game to watch.

So: as a rôle-playing system, *Worlds of Wonder* is clean and playable, but limited. As an introduction to what rôle-playing is and can be, it is a prize.

THE MISKATONIC UNIVERSITY PRACTICUM

Call of Cthulhu

The Chaosium, Inc. (see address above)

Boxed set, \$20 (+\$2 p/h)

Requires 4-, 6-, 8-, and 20-sided dice, included

Designed by Sandy Petersen

Call of Cthulhu (pronounced as “an aspirated spit”) is set in the strange and terrifying world of H. P. Lovecraft's fiction: hideous monsters, and the depraved human cults that worship them, lurk just below the racy, glittering surface of the Roaring Twenties.

CC is also based on *Basic Rôle-Playing*, and could be merged with the *WW* Worlds — but at heart it is a different sort of game. In *Call of Cthulhu* the characters (“Investigators”) head into dark, haunted places, but in search of knowledge and the answers to myster-

ies, not loot; and they will encounter monsters — but Lovecraft's creatures are not dumb scaly animals waiting for adventures to come and kill them. They are partly squamous, partly rugose, and completely *bad news*. CC characters have a characteristic in addition to the basic descriptive numbers; this number is Sanity, and every encounter with The Unknown erodes it a little more, until one's character completely flips out (and the author provides a description of the state of psychotherapy in the period, which is not reassuring).

I can think of few unkind things to do to the typical confident fantasy-adventuring team (Have Chainmail, Will Travel) than to throw a shoggoth or Lesser Old One at them. Great Cthulhu Himself is in the book, but He would be a fair match for an armored division.

However, there is more to adventure than killing monsters and grabbing treasure. Solving puzzles, piecing together clues, can (if the operator and players are good at it) be a far bigger mental kick than rolling a handful of dice and announcing "We killed it" can ever be.

Character creation is complete — down to geographical origin, by actual population distribution in Twenties America — logical, and not overly complex, but requiring conscientious players who will select skills in a logical background pattern, not just take the most immediately useful ones. (Any game with the character profession of Dilettante has its heart in the right place.)

There are guns, of course, naturally including the Thompson SMG, and some even heavier artillery (and bullwhips, if chasing after lost arks is your thing). The designer repeatedly warns against excessive gunplay; in the first

place, bullets have little effect on intelligent fungi from Yuggoth, and in the second, unlike most medieval-fantasy environments, this one contains police and FBI and courts and jails. While being High Priest of the Starry Wisdom sect may not be against the law, shooting him dead assuredly is.

The set comes with "A Sourcebook for the 1920s," which is a pleasant introduction — though no more than an introduction — to a fascinating period, a large world map locating real and Lovecraftian sites, and some papercut-out figures that illustrate relative sizes of people and Things. (I love the heavily armed flappers. Miniature people of the Twenties may be obtained from model railroad suppliers, such as Walthers of Milwaukee.)

Call of Cthulhu has my strong, but qualified, recommendation. It is mystery-adventure, not combat-adventure (though there's plenty of room for action, with pursuits by roadster, railroad, aeroplane, and Zeppelin). Provided this suits the players' tastes and the operator's skills — and provided that all are fairly familiar with Lovecraft's work, lest they be lost from the start — the rules work well and deliver the eldritch goods.

In a field where "nameless horror" usually refers to the designer's grammar, that's a fine performance.

ROAD & FLAK

Car Wars

Steve Jackson Games, Box 18957,
Austin TX 78760

Boxed, \$5 (+.50 p/h)

Requires 6-sided dice, not included

Designed by Steve Jackson and Chad Irby

... You smile at one another, driver to driver, because a little courtesy

never hurts and besides, it looks good to the folks watching at home. Then the bullet-resistant power windows roll up, the gun muzzles extend from behind the parking lights, the Sports-TwentyFour chopper rises to a safe camera distance, and the hell with chivalry; this is the highway, this is war. . . .

I am not going to analyze the fantasy of equipping one's automobile with weapons and armor and going forth upon the blacktop to duel with one's fellow roadhogs; I note only that it is a very popular fantasy, especially right after some joker in a Dodge pickup has just done his best to sideswipe one into flaming wreckage on the shoulder of I-80.

Well, for those of you who would like to expend a little of that fuel-injected tension, there is *Car Wars*. Drive the armed Detroit iron of your dreams down the highways of the Not Too Distant Future, blasting bikers, tailgaters, and **SPEED LIMIT 55** signs.

The rules for maneuvering vehicles are straightforward and comprehensive — really very good, considering what complexities might have been written in. One can throw cars into rubber-scrubbing esses and do the famous bootlegger reverse (where my people come from it ain't no legend), but the authors have saved themselves and the players a lot of trouble by not trying to design in every stunt Remy Julienne has ever pulled in a movie. But the system is open-ended, and autoacrobatics can be added as players think of them.

The combat rules are similarly clean, unencumbered with lists of special cases and modifiers. The list of weapons includes machineguns, rocket launchers, lasers (?!), and such spy-movie favorites as oil sprayers and tire

spikes — plus an assortment of hand weapons so the pedestrians can shoot back.

Car Wars also comes equipped with a set of "campaign" rules — provisions for drivers to progress from one combat to the next, earning fame, glory, and devalued dollars; this sort of thing is almost obligatory in these days of rôle-playing games, whether or not a long-haul campaign makes any sense or not. Drivers have such a low survival rate in this game that a championship "autoduelling" season would likely last about three hours (or 165 miles, whichever comes first).

Which is hardly a flaw in the game. *Car Wars* is good silly fun in the same violent-bloodless fashion as a James Bond movie, and costs about the same as one movie ticket. Its movement system could be easily applied to any adventure game of the automotive era — Thirties-gangster car chases, for instance, or black sedans pursuing Commander Bond's Aston Martin DB5. The counters are four-color and gorgeous, even if you do have to cut them apart yourself; and the game comes in Steve Jackson's new flat plastic box, sized for pocket, purse, or glove compartment.

All for five dollars (plus taxes, delivery, and dealer prep). That's a Volkswagen price for a Porsche-class game.

TWO-DIMENSIONAL CHARACTERS

Cardboard Heroes

Steve Jackson Games (Address, see above)

\$3 per set (+.50 p/h)

The Cardboard Hero is a strip of coated board printed with front and back views of a figure — human, animal, monster, whatever. You cut the

sheet apart, fold them up (or stick them into bases — see below) and hey presto, they're miniature figures, in full color, with all of the detail that has ever been cast into an inch-high figure — and some details that can't be practically cast, like thin-boned skeletons in rags of clothing, and rapiers fine as a hair.

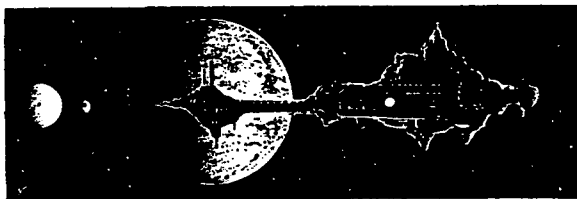
There are now nine sets of Heroes: seven fantasy sets painted by Denis Loubet (including monsters and a splendid set of Undead), a set of 15mm tall *Traveller* figures by Paul Jaquays (less cartoony than much of his work has been, though the color registration in my set is slightly fuzzy), and a set of superheroes by Jeff Dee. The costumed heroes deserve special attention, because while there are legions of metal fantasy miniatures and many nice sets for *Traveller*, one just can't find figures for the people in capes and tights.

The price is still unbeatable: three sheets, about forty figures (more in the

Traveller set) for \$3 and a few minutes with cutting tools.

I have two suggestions: sets of standard sword-fodder types, the sort you need a bunch of, like uniformed security guards . . . and a superheroes set with plain black line sketches that could be colored in, for those of us (like me) who can think of costumes but can't draw the human figure in action. (If you like these ideas, or have some of your own, write Steve Jackson. Tell him who sent you.)

Also available are plastic bases for the Heroes. These are lengths of something rather like automobile trim strip, with a groove to hold the cutout. They must be cut to length, and do tend to cover the figure's feet, but they are more stable than the plain easel and can also be used to support cutouts of your own devising — wall sections, for instance. \$3 (+.50 p/h) buys four 7" strips, in black or white.



ON WRITING SCIENCE FICTION (The Editors Strike Back!)

by George Scithers, John M. Ford, & Darrell Schweitzer

"This book is a golden opportunity to see behind the editorial office doors and find out why some stories make it and most others are given printed rejection slips." ... Tom Staicar in *Amazing SF Stories*

"If you have ambitions toward selling professionally, you ought to have a copy." ... Don D'Amassa in *SF Chronicle*

This book is available in bookstores or directly from the publisher, Owlswick Press, Box 8243, Philadelphia PA 19101-8243 at \$17.50 (which includes shipping).

FLARE TIME

by Larry Niven

art: George Barr



G. Barr



Larry Niven has many spectacular books to his credit, including Ringworld, The Mote in God's Eye, Lucifer's Hammer, Oath of Fealty (These last three with Jerry Pournelle), and Dream Park (with Steven Barnes). He has been a leading "hard" science fiction writer since the middle 1960s.

"Flare Time" belongs to the much-delayed Harlan's World: Medea project. Under Harlan Ellison's leadership, the planet Medea was created by Hal Clement, Poul Anderson, Frederik Pohl, and Larry; then painted by Kelly Freas. Robert Silverberg, Theodore Sturgeon, Thomas M. Disch, Frank Herbert, and Kate Wilhelm then joined in and wrote stories for this setting. The accumulated results are forthcoming as a book.

If the starship's arrival had done nothing else for Bronze Legs, this was enough: he was seeing the sky again.

For this past week the rammers had roamed through Touchdown City. The fifty-year-old colony was still small; everybody knew everybody. It was hard to get used to, this influx of oddly-accented strangers stumbling about with vacuous smiles and eyes wide with surprise and pleasure. Even the Medean humans were catching the habit. In his thirty-four earthyears of life Calvin "Bronze Legs" Miller had explored fifteen thousand square miles of the infinite variety that was Medea. Strange, that it took people from another world to make him look up.

Here was a pretty picture: sunset over the wild lands north of the colony. Peaks to the south were limned in bluish-white from the farmlands beyond, from the lamps that kept terrestrial plants growing. Everything else was red, infinite shades of red. To seaward a level horizon cut the great disk of Argo in half. You could feel the heat on your cheek, and watch sullenly glowing storms move in bands across the face of the red-hot superjovian world. To coldward, Phrixus and Helle were two glaring pink dots following each other down to the ridge. The Jet Stream stretched straight across the blue sky, a pinkish-white band of cloud from horizon to horizon. Thirty or forty multicolored balloons, linked in a cluster, were settling to graze a scum-covered rain pool in the valley below him.

Blue-tinged shadows pooled in the valley, and three human shapes moved through the red and orange vegetation. Bronze Legs recognized Lightning Harness and Grace Carpenter even at this distance. The third had a slightly hunchbacked look, and a metal headdress gleamed in her straight black hair. That would be Rachel Subramaniam's memory recording equipment. Her head kept snapping left and right, ever eager for new sights.

Bronze Legs grinned. He tried to imagine how this must look to a rammer, an offworlder; he succeeded only in remembering himself as a child. All this strangeness; all this red.

He turned the howler and continued uphill.

At the crest of the ridge a fux waited for him, the pinkish-white suns behind her. She was a black silhouette, four thin legs and two thin arms, a pointed face and a narrow torso bent in an L: a lean, mean centaur-shape.

As he topped the ridge and let the howler settle on its air cushion, the fux backed away several meters. Bronze Legs wondered why, then guessed the answer. It wasn't the smell of him. Fuxes liked that. She was putting the ridge between herself and the white glare from Touchdown City's farming lamps. She said, "I am Long Nose."

"Bronze Legs. I meet you on purpose."

"I meet you on purpose. How goes your foray to heatward?"

"We start tomorrow at dawn."

"You postponed it once before." She was accusing him. The fuxes were compulsive about punctuality: an odd trait in a Bronze Age culture. Like certain traits in humans, it probably tied into their sex lives. Timing could be terribly important when a fux was giving birth.

"The ship from the stars came," he said. "We waited. We want to take one of the star people along, and the delay lets us recheck the vehicles."

Long Nose was black with dull dark-red markings. She bore a longbow over one shoulder and a quiver and shovel slung over her lower back. Her snout was sharply pointed, but not abnormally so, for a fux. She might be named for keen curiosity or a keen sense of smell. She said, "I learn that your purpose is more than exploration, but not even the post-males can tell what it is."

"Power," said Bronze Legs. "The harnessed lightning that makes our machines go comes as light from Argo. In the Hot End the clouds will never hide Argo from our sight. Our lightning makers can run without rest."

"Go north instead," said Long Nose. "You will find it safer and cooler too. Storms run constantly in the north; I have been there. Free lightning for your use."

If she'd been talking to Lightning Harness she would have suffered through an hour's lecture. How the heat exchangers ran on the flood of infrared light from Argo, focussed by mirrors. How Argo stayed always in

the same place in Medea's sky, so that mirrors could be mounted on a hillside facing to heartward, and never moved again. But the colony was growing, and Medea's constant storms constantly blocked the mirrors . . . Bronze Legs only grinned at her. "Why don't we just do it our way? Who-all is coming?"

"Only six of us. Dark Wind's children did not emerge in time. Deadeye will desert us early; she will give birth in a day and must stay to guard the . . . Is 'nest' the word you use?"

"Right." Of all the words that might describe the fuxes' way of giving birth, "nest" carried the least unpleasant connotations.

"So, she will be guarding her 'nest' when we return. She will be male then. Sniffer intends to become pregnant tonight; she will leave us further on, and be there to help us on our return, if we need help."

"Good."

"We take a post-male, Harvester, and another six-leg female, Broad Flanks, who can carry him some of the time. Gimpy wants to come. Will she slow us?"

Bronze Legs laughed. He knew Gimpy: a four-leg female as old as some post-males, who had lost her right foreleg to the viciously fast Medean monster humans called a B-70. Gimpy was fairly agile, considering. "She could crawl on her belly for all we care. It's the crawlers that'll slow us, and the power plant. We're moving a lot of machinery: the prefab power plant, housing for technicians, sensing tools, digging tools — "

"What tools should we take?"

"Go armed. You won't need water bags; we'll make our own water. We made you some parasols made from mirror-cloth. They'll help you stand the heat, for awhile. When it gets really hot you'll have to ride in the crawlers."

"We will meet you at the crawling machines, at dawn." Long Nose turned and moved downslope into a red-and-orange jungle, moving something like a cat in its final rush at a bird: legs bent, belly low.

They had been walking since early afternoon: twelve hours, with a long break for lunch. Lightning sighed with relief as he set down the farming lamp he'd been carrying on his shoulders. Grace helped him spread the tripod and extend the mount until the lamp stood six meters tall.

Rachel Subramaniam sat down in the orange grass and rubbed her feet. She was puffing.

Grace Carpenter, a Medean xenobiologist in her early forties, was a large-boned woman, broad of silhouette and built like a farm wife. Lightning Harness was tall and lean and lantern-jawed, a twenty-four-year-old power plant engineer. Both were pale as ghosts beside Rachel.

On Medea only the farmers were tanned.

Rachel was built light. Some of her memory recording equipment was embedded in padding along her back, giving her a slightly hunchbacked look. Her scalp implants were part of a polished silver cap, the badge of her profession. She had spent the past two years under the sunlights aboard a web ramship. Her skin was bronze. To Rachel Medea's pale citizens had seemed frail, unathletic, until now. Now she was annoyed. There had been little opportunity for hikes aboard *Morven*; but she might have noticed the muscles and hard hands common to any recent colony.

Lightning pointed uphill. "Company."

Something spidery stood on the crest of the coldward ridge, black against the suns. Rachel asked, "What is it?"

"Fux. Female, somewhere between seven and eighteen years of age, and not a virgin. Beyond that I can't tell from here."

Rachel was astonished. "How can you know all that?"

"Count the legs. Grace, didn't you tell her about fuxes?"

Grace was chuckling. "Lightning's showing off. Dear, the fuxes go fertile around age seven. They generally have their first litter right away. They drop their first set of hindquarters with the eggs in them; and that gives them half a lifetime to learn how to move as a quadruped. Then they wait till they're seventeen or eighteen to have their second litter, unless the tribe is underpopulated, which sometimes happens. Dropping the second set of hindquarters exposes the male organs."

"And she's got four legs. 'Not a virgin.' I thought you must have damn good eyes, Lightning."

"Not that good."

"What are they like?"

"Well," said Grace, "the post-males are the wise ones. Bright, talkative, and not nearly so . . . frenetic as the females. It's hard to get a female to stand still for long. The males . . . oh, for three years after the second litter they're kind of crazy. The tribe keeps them penned. The females only go near them when they want to get pregnant."

Lightning had finished setting the lamp. "Take a good look around before I turn this on. You know what you're about to see?"

Dutifully, Rachel looked about her, memorizing.

The farming lamps stood everywhere around Touchdown City; it was less a city than a village surrounded by farmlands. For more than a week Rachel had seen only the tiny part of Medea claimed by humans . . . until, in early afternoon of this long Medean day, she and Grace and Lightning had left the farmlands. The reddish light had bothered her for a time. But there was much to see; and after all, this was the *real* Medea.

Orange grass stood knee-high in slender leaves with sharp hard points. A score of flaccid multicolored balloons, linked by threads that resembled spiderweb, had settled on a stagnant pond. There was a grove of almost-

trees, hairy rather than leafy, decked in all the colors of autumn. The biggest was white and bare and dead.

Clouds of bugs filled the air everywhere except around the humans. A pair of things glided into the swarms, scooping their dinner out of the air. They had five-meter wingspans, small batlike torsos, and huge heads that were all mouth, with gaping hair-filled slits behind the head, where gill slits would be on a fish. Their undersides were sky blue.

A six-legged creature the size of a sheep stood up against the dead almost-tree, gripped it with four limbs, and seemed to chew at it. Rachel wondered if it was eating the wood. Then she saw myriads of black dots spread across the white, and a long, sticky tongue slurping them up.

Grace tapped Rachel's arm and pointed into the grass. Rachel saw a warrior's copper shield painted with cryptic heraldics. It was a flattened turtle shell, and the yellow-eyed beaked face that looked back at her was not turtle-like at all. Something small struggled in its beak. Suddenly the mock turtle whipped around and zzzzed away on eight churning legs. There was no bottom shell to hamper the legs.

The *real* Medea.

"Now," said Lightning. He turned on the farming lamp.

White light made the valley suddenly less alien. Rachel felt something within her relaxing . . . but things were happening all around her.

The flat turtle stopped abruptly. It swallowed hard, then pulled head and limbs under its shell. The flying bug-strainers whipped around and flew hard for the hairy trees. The clouds of bugs simply vanished. The long-tongued beast let go of its tree, turned and scratched at the ground and was gone in seconds.

"This is what happens when a sun flares," Lightning said. "They're both flare suns. Flares don't usually last more than half an hour, and most Medean animals just dig in till it's over. A lot of plants go to seed. Like this grass —"

Yes, the slender leaves were turning puffy, cottony. But the hairy trees reacted differently; they were suddenly very slender, the foliage pulled tight against the trunks. The balloons weren't reacting at all.

Lightning said, "That's why we don't worry much about Medean life attacking the crops. The lamps keep them away. But not all of them —"

"On Medea every rule has exceptions," Grace said.

"Yeah. Here, look under the grass." Lightning pushed cotton-covered leaves aside with his hands, and the air was suddenly full of white fluff. Rachel saw millions of black specks covering the lower stalks. "We call them locusts. They swarm in flare time and eat everything in sight. Terran plants poison them, of course, but they wreck the crops first." He let the leaves close. By now there was white fluff everywhere, like a low-lying fog patch moving east on the wind. "What else can I show you? Keep your eyes on the balloons. And are there cameras in that thing?"

Rachel laughed and touched the metal helmet. Sometimes she could forget she was wearing it; but her neck was thicker, more muscular than the average woman's. "Cameras? In a sense. My eyes are cameras for the memory tape."

The balloons rested just where they had been. The artificial flare hadn't affected them . . . wait, they weren't flaccid any more. They were swollen, taut, straining at the rootlets that held them to the bottom of the pond. Suddenly they rose, all at once, still linked by spiderweb. Beautiful.

"They use the UV for energy to make hydrogen," said Grace. "UV wouldn't bother them anyway; they have to take more of it at high altitude."

"I've been told . . . are they intelligent?"

"Balloons? No!" Grace actually snorted. "They're no brighter than so much seaweed . . . but they own the planet. We've sent probes to the Hot End, you know. We saw balloons all the way. And we've seen them as far coldward . . . west, you'd say . . . as far west as the Icy Sea. We haven't gone beyond the rim of ice yet."

"But you've been on Medea fifty years?"

"And just getting started," Lightning said. He turned off the farming lamp.

The world was plunged into red darkness.

The fluffy white grass was gone, leaving bare soil aswarm with black specks. Gradually the hairy trees loosened, fluffed out. Soil churned near the dead tree and released the tree feeder.

Grace picked up a few of the "locusts." They were not bigger than termites. Held close to the eye they each showed a translucent bubble on its back. "They can't swarm," Grace said with satisfaction. "Our flare didn't last long enough. They couldn't make enough hydrogen."

"Some did," Lightning said. There were black specks on the wind; not many.

"Always something new," said Grace.

Tractor probe Junior was moving into the Hot End. Ahead was the vast desert, hotter than boiling water, where Argo stood always at noon. Already the strange dry plants were losing their grip, leaving bare rock and dust. At the final shore of the Ring Sea the waves were sudsy with salt in solution, and the shore was glittering white. The hot steamy wind blew inland, to heatward, and then upward, carrying a freight of balloons.

The air was full of the multicolored dots, all going up into the stratosphere. At the upper reach of the probe's vision some of the frailer balloons were popping, but the thin membranous corpses still fluttered toward heaven.

Rachel shifted carefully in her chair. She caught Bronze Legs Miller watching her from a nearby table. Her answering grin was rueful.

She had not finished the hike. Grace and Lightning had been setting up camp when Bronze Legs Miller came riding down the hill. Rachel had grasped that golden opportunity. She had returned to Touchdown City riding behind Bronze Legs on the howler's saddle. After a night of sleep she still ached in every muscle.

"Isn't it a gorgeous sight?" Mayor Curly Jackson wasn't eating. He watched avidly, with his furry chin in his hands and his elbows on the great oaken table — the dignitaries' table the Medeans were so proud of; it had taken forty years to grow the tree.

Medea had changed its people. Even the insides of buildings were different from those of other worlds. The communal dining hall was a great dome lit by a single lamp at its zenith. It was bright, and it cast sharp shadows. As if the early colonists, daunted by the continual light show — the flare suns, the bluish farming lamps, the red-hot storms moving across Argo — had given themselves a single sun indoors. But it was a wider, cooler sun, giving yellower light than a rammer was used to.

One great curve of the wall was a holograph projection screen. The tractor-probe was tracing the path the expedition would follow and broadcasting what it saw. Now it moved over hills of white sea salt. The picture staggered and lurched with the probe's motion, and wavered with rising air currents.

Captain Janice Borg, staring avidly with a forkful of curry halfway to her mouth, jumped as Mayor Curly lightly punched her shoulder. The Mayor was blue eyes and a lump of nose poking through a carefully tended wealth of blond hair and beard. He was darkened by farming lamps. Not only did he supervise the farms; he farmed. "See it, Captain? That's why the Ring Sea is mostly fresh water."

Captain Borg's hair was auburn going gray. She was handsome rather than pretty. Her voice of command had the force of a bullwhip; one obeyed by reflex. Her off-duty voice was a soft, dreamy contralto. "Right. Right. The seawater moves always to the Hot End. It starts as glaciers, doesn't it? They break off in the Icy Sea and float heatward. Any salt goes that way too. In the Hot End the water boils away . . . and you get some tides, don't you? Argo wobbles a little?"

"Well, it's Medea that wobbles a little, but —"

"Right, so the seawater spills off into the salt flats at high tide and boils away there. And the vapor goes back to the glaciers along the Jet Stream." She turned suddenly to Rachel and barked, "You getting all this?"

Rachel nodded, hiding a smile. More than two hundred years had passed on the settled worlds while Captain Borg cruised the trade circuit. She didn't really understand memory tapes. They were too recent.

Rachel looked about the communal dining hall and was conscious as always of the vast unseen audience looking through her eyes, listening through her ears, feeling the dwindling aches of a stiff hike, tasting

blazing hot Medean curry through her mouth. It was all going into the memory tape, with no effort on her part.

Curly said, "We picked a good site for the power plant before the first probe broke down. Heatward slope of a hillside. We'll be coming up on it in a few hours. Is this the kind of thing you want, or am I boring you?"

"I want it all. Did you try that tape?"

The Mayor shook his head, his eyes suddenly evasive.

"Why not?"

"Well," the Mayor said slowly, "I'm a little leery of what I might remember. It's all filtered through your brain, isn't it, Rachel?"

"Of course."

"I don't think I'd like remembering being a girl."

Rachel was mildly surprised. Role-changing was part of the kick. Male or female, an epicurean or a superbly muscled physical culture addict or an intellectual daydreamer, a child again or an old woman . . . well, some didn't like it. "I could give you a man's tape, Curly. There's McAuliffe's balloon trip into the big gas giant in Sol system."

Captain Borg cut in sharply. "What about the Charles Baker Sontag tape? He did a year's tour in Miramon Lluagor system, Curly. The Lluagorians use balloons for everything. You'd love it."

Curly was confused. "Just what kind of balloons —"

"Not living things, Curly. Fabric filled with gas. Lluagor has a red dwarf sun. No radiation storms and not much ultraviolet. They have to put their farms in orbit, and they do most of their living in orbit, and it's all inflated balloons, even the spacecraft. The planet they use mainly for mining and factories, but it's pretty, too, so they've got cities slung under hundreds of gasbags."

The tractor probe lurched across mile after mile of dim-lit pink salt hills. Rachel remembered a memory tape in *Morven's* library: a critical reading of the Elder and Younger Eddas by a teacher of history and poetry. Would Medeans like that? Here you had the Land of the Frost Giants and the Land of the Fire Giants, with Midgard between . . . and the Ring Sea to stand in for the Midgard Serpent . . . and no dearth of epic monsters, from what she'd heard.

Captain Borg spoke with an edge in her voice. "Nobody's going to force you to use a new and decadent entertainment medium from the stars, Curly —"

"Oh, now, I didn't —"

"But there's a point you might consider. Distance."

"Distance?"

"There's the trade circuit. Earth, Toupan, Lluagor, Sereda, Horvendile, Koschei, Earth again. Six planets circling six stars a few light years apart. The web ramships go round and round, and everyone on the ring gets news, entertainment, seeds and eggs, new inventions. There's the

trade circuit, and there's Medea. You're too far from Horvendile, Curly."

"Oddly enough, we're aware of that, Captain Borg."

"No need to get huffy. I'm trying to make a point."

"Why did *you* come?"

"Variety. Curiosity. The grass-is-always-greener syndrome. The same thing that made us rammers in the first place." Captain Borg did not add altruism, the urge to keep the worlds civilized. "But will we keep coming? Curly, Medea is the strangest place that ever had a breathable atmosphere. You've got a potential tourist trap here. You could have ramships dropping by every twenty years!"

"We need that."

"Yes, you do. So remember that rammers don't build starships. It's taxpayers that build starships. What do they get out of it?"

"Memory tapes?"

"Yes. It used to be holos. Times change. Holos aren't as involving as memory tapes, and they take too long to watch. So it's memory tapes."

"Does that mean we have to use them?"

"No," said Captain Borg.

"Then I'll try your tourist's view of Lluagor system, when I get time." Curly stood. "And I better get going. Twenty-five hours to dawn."

"It only takes ten minutes," Rachel said.

"How long to recover? How long to assimilate a whole earthyear of someone else's memories? I better wait."

After he was gone, Rachel asked, "What was wrong with giving him the Jupiter tape?"

"I remembered McAuliffe was a homosexual."

"So what? He was all alone in that capsule."

"It might matter to someone like Curly. I don't say it would, I say it might. Every world is different."

"You ought to know." The rumor mill said that Mayor Curly and Captain Borg had shared a bed. Though he hadn't shown it . . .

Too lightly, Captain Borg said, "I should but I don't."

"Oh?"

"He's . . . closed. It's the usual problem, I think. He sees me coming back in sixty or seventy years, and me ten years older. Doesn't want to get too involved."

"Janice?"

"Dammit, if they're so afraid of change, how could their parents have busted their asses to settle a whole new world? Change is the one thing . . . yeah? What is it?"

"Did you ask him, or did he ask you?"

Captain Borg frowned. "He asked me. Why?"

"Nobody's asked me," said Rachel.

"Oh. . . . Well, ask someone. Customs differ."

"But he asked you."

"I dazzled him with sex appeal. Or maybe not. Rachel, shall I ask Curly about it? There might be something we don't know. Maybe you wear your hair wrong."

Rachel shook her head. "No."

"But . . . okay. The rest of the crew don't seem to be having problems."

Nearly dawn. The sky was thick with dark clouds, but the heatward horizon was clear, with Argo almost fully risen. The dull red disk would never rise completely, not here. Already it must be sinking back.

It was earthnight now; the farming lamps were off. Crops and livestock kept terrestrial time. Rows of green plants stretched away to the south, looking almost black in this light. In the boundary of bare soil between the wilds and the croplands, half a dozen fuxes practiced spear casts. That was okay with Bronze Legs. Humans didn't spend much time in that border region. They plowed the contents of their toilets into it, to sterilize it of Medean microorganisms and fertilize it for next year's crops. The fuxes didn't seem to mind the smell.

Bronze Legs waited patiently beside his howler. He wished Windstorm would do the same.

The two house-sized crawlers were of a pattern familiar to many worlds: long, bulbous pressure hulls mounted on ground-effect platforms. They were decades old, but they had been tended with loving care. Hydrogen fuel cells powered them. One of the crawlers now carried, welded to its roof, a sender capable of reaching *Morven* in its present equatorial orbit: another good reason for waiting for the web ramship's arrival.

The third and largest vehicle was the power plant itself, fully assembled and tested, mounted on the ground-effect systems from two crawlers and with a crawler's control cabin welded on in front. It trailed a raft: yet another ground effect system covered by a padded platform with handrails. The fuxes would be riding that.

All vehicles were loaded and boarded well ahead of time. Windstorm Wolheim moved among them, ticking off lists in her head and checking them against what she could see. The tall, leggy redhead was a chronic worrier.

Phrixus (or maybe Helle) was suddenly there, a hot pink point near Argo. The fuxes picked up their spears and trotted off northward. Bronze Legs lifted his howler on its air cushion and followed. Behind him the three bigger vehicles whispered into action, and Windstorm ran for her howler.

* * *

Rachel was in the passenger seat of the lead crawler, looking out through the great bubble windscreen. In the Hot End the crawlers would house the power plant engineers. Now they were packed with equipment. Square kilometers of thin silvered plastic sheet, and knock-down frames to hold it all, would become solar mirrors. Black plastic and more frames would become the radiator fins, mounted on the back of that hill in the Hot End. There were spools of superconducting cable and flywheels for power storage. Rachel kept bumping her elbow on the corner of a crate.

The pinkish daylight was dimming, graying, as the Jet Stream spread to engulf the sky. The fuxes were far ahead, keeping no obvious formation. In this light they seemed a convocation of mythical monsters: centaurs, eight-limbed dragons, a misshapen dwarf. The dwarf was oddest of all. Rachel had seen him close: A nasty caricature of a man, with a foxy face, huge buttocks, exaggerated male organs, and (the anomaly) a tail longer than he was tall. Yet Harvester was solemn and slow-moving, and he seemed to have the respect of fuxes and humans both.

The vehicles whispered along at thirty kilometers an hour, uphill through orange grass, swerving around hairy trees. A fine drizzle began. Lightning Harness turned on the wipers.

Rachel asked, "Isn't this where we were a few days back?"

"Medean yesterday. That's right," said Grace.

"Hard to tell. We're going north, aren't we? Why not straight east?"

"It's partly for our benefit, dear. We'll be in the habitable domains longer. We'll see more variety; we'll both learn more. When we swing around to heatward we'll be nearer the north pole. It won't get hot so fast."

"Good."

Bronze Legs and a woman Rachel didn't know flanked them on the one-seater ground-effect vehicles, the howlers. Bronze Legs wore shorts, and in fact his legs were bronze. Black by race, he'd paled to Rachel's color during years of Medean sunlight. Rachel asked, half to herself, "Why not just Bronze?"

Grace understood. "They didn't mean his skin."

"What?"

"The fuxes named him for the time his howler broke down and stranded him forty miles from civilization. He walked home. He was carrying some heavy stuff, but a troop of fuxes joined him and they couldn't keep up. They've got lots of energy but no stamina. So they named him Bronze Legs. Bronze is the hardest metal they knew, till we came."

The rain had closed in. A beast like yesterday's flying bug strainers took to the air almost under the treads. For a moment it was face to face with Rachel, its large eyes and tremendous mouth all widened in horror. A wing ticked the windshield as it dodged.

Lightning cursed and turned on the headlights. As if by previous agreement, lights sprang to life on the howlers and the vehicles behind. "We don't like to do that," said Lightning.

"Do what?"

"Use headlights. Every domain is different. You never know what the local life will do when a flare comes, not till you've watched it happen. Here it's okay. Nothing worse than locusts."

Even the headlights had a yellowish tinge, Rachel thought.

The gray cliffs ahead ran hundreds of kilometers to heatward and coldward. They were no more than a few hundred feet high, but they were fresh and new. Medea wobbled a little in its course around Argo, and the tides could raise savage quakes. All the rocks had sharp angles; wind and life had not had a chance to wear them down.

The pass was new too, as if God had cleft the spine of the new mountains with a battle-ax. The floor of it was filled with rubble. The vehicles glided above the broken rock, riding high, with fans on maximum.

Now the land sloped gently down, and the expedition followed. Through the drizzle Bronze Legs glimpsed a grove of trees, hairy trees like those near Touchdown City, but different. They grew like spoons standing on end, with the cup of the spoon facing Argo. The ground was covered with tightly curled black filaments, a plant the color and texture of Bronze Legs' own hair.

They had changed domain. Bronze Legs hadn't been in this territory, but he remembered that Windstorm had. He called, "Anything unexpected around here?"

"B-70s."

"They do get around, don't they? Anything else?"

"It's an easy slope down to the shore," Windstorm called, "but then there's a kind of parasitic fungus floating on the ocean. Won't hurt us, but it can kill a Medean animal in an hour. I told Harvester. He'll make the others wait for us."

"Good."

They rode in silence for a bit. Drizzle made it hard to see much. Bronze Legs wasn't worried. The B-70s would stay clear of their headlights. This was explored territory; and even after they left it, the probes had mapped their route.

"That professional tourist," Windstorm called suddenly. "Did you get to know her?"

"Not really. What about her? Mayor Curly said to be polite."

"When was I ever not polite? But I didn't grow up with her, Bronze

Legs. Nobody did. We know more about fuxes than we do about rammers, and this one's peculiar for a rammer! How could a woman give up all her privacy like that?"

"You tell me."

"I wish I knew what she'd do in a church."

"At least she wouldn't close her eyes. She's a dedicated tourist. Can you picture that? But she might not get involved either." Bronze Legs thought hard before he added, "I tried one of those memory tapes."

"What? You?"

"History of the Fission Period in Eurasia, 1945-2010, from *Morven's* library. Education, not entertainment."

"Why that?"

"Whim."

"Well, what's it like?"

"It's . . . it's like I did a lot of research, and formed conclusions and checked them out and sometimes changed my mind, and it gave me a lot of satisfaction. There are still some open questions, like how the Soviets actually got the fission bomb, and the Vietnam War, and the Arab Takeover. But I know who's working on that, and . . . It's like that, but it doesn't connect to anything. It sits in my head in a clump. But it's kind of fun, Windstorm, and I got it all in ten minutes. You want to hear a libelous song about President Peanut?"

"No."

Through the drizzle they could see the restless stirring of the Ring Ocean. A band of fuxes waited on the sand. Windstorm turned her howler in a graceful curve, back toward the blur of the crawlers' headlights, to lead them. Bronze Legs dowsed his lights and glided toward the fuxes.

They had chosen a good resting place, far from the dangerous shore, in a broad stretch of "black man's hair" that any marauder would have to cross. Most of the fuxes were lying down. The four-legged female had been impregnated six Medean days ago. Her time must be near. She scratched with sharp claws at her itching hindquarters.

Harvester came to meet Bronze Legs. The post-male biped was slow with age, but not clumsy. That tremendous length of black tail was good for his balance. It was tipped with a bronze spearhead. Harvester asked, "Will we follow the shoreline? If we may choose, we will keep your vessels between us and the shore."

"We plan to go straight across," Bronze Legs told him. "You'll ride the raft behind the bigger vessel."

"In the water are things dangerous to us," said Harvester. He glanced shoreward and added, "Things small, things large. A large one comes."

Bronze Legs took one look and reached for his intercom. "Lightning, Hairy, Jill! Turn your searchlights on that thing, fast!"

The fuxes were up and reaching for their spears.

* * *

"So it's the fuxes who give you your nicknames," Rachel said. "Why did they call you Lightning?"

"I tend the machines that make lightning and move it through metal wires. At least, that's how we explained it to the fuxes. And Windstorm — You saw the big redheaded girl on the other howler? She was on guard one earthnight when a troop of fuxes took a short cut through the wheat crop. She really gave them hell. Half of Touchdown city must have heard her."

"And you? Grace."

"They named me when I was a lot younger." Grace glared at Lightning, who was very busy driving and clearly not listening, and by no means was he smiling. "But they didn't call me Grace. The way we have children, the fuxes think that's hilarious."

Rachel didn't ask.

"They called me Boobs."

Rachel felt the need for a change of subject. "Lightning, are you getting tired? Would you like me to take over?"

"I'm okay. Can you drive a crawler?"

"Actually, I've never done it. I can run a howler, though. In any terrain."

"Maybe we'll give you one after —"

Then Bronze Legs' voice bellowed from the intercom.

Something came out of the ocean: a great swollen myriapod with tiny jointed arms moving around a funnel-shaped mouth. Teeth churned in the gullet.

The fuxes cast their spears and fled. Bronze Legs tucked Harvester under one arm and sped shoreward; the howler listed to port. Deadeye fell behind; two fuxes turned back and took her arms and pulled her along.

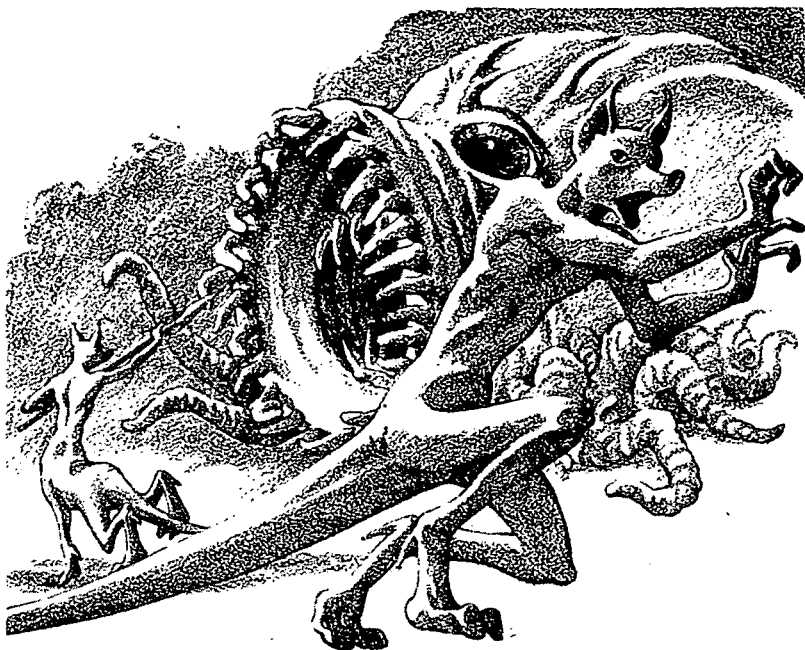
The monster flowed up the beach, faster than any of them, ignoring the spears stuck in its flesh.

One, two, three searchlights flashed from the vehicles and played over the myriapod. The beams were bluish, unlike the headlights. Flare sunlight.

The myriapod stopped. Turned, clumsily, and began to retreat down the beach. It had nearly reached the water when it lost coordination. The legs thrashed frantically and without effect. As Rachel watched in horrified fascination, things were born from the beast.

They crawled from its back and sides. Hundreds of them. They were dark red and dog-sized. They did not leave the myriapod; they stayed on it, feeding. Its legs were quiet now.

Three of the fuxes darted down the beach, snatched up their fallen spears and retreated just as fast. The myriapod was little more than a skeleton now, and the dog-sized feeders were beginning to spread across the sand.



The fuxes climbed aboard the air-cushioned raft that trailed behind the mobile power plant. They arranged their packs and settled themselves. The paired vehicles lifted and glided toward the water. Lightning lifted the crawler and followed.

Rachel said, "But — "

"We'll be okay," Lightning assured her. "We'll stay high and cross fast, and there are always the searchlights."

"Grace, tell him! There are animals that like the searchlights!"

Grace patted her hand. The expedition set off across the water.

The colony around Touchdown City occupied part of a fat peninsula projecting deep into the Ring Sea. It took the expedition twelve hours to cross a bay just smaller than the Gulf of Mexico.

Vermillion scum patches covered the water. Schools of flying non-fish veered and dived at sight of the wrong-colored headlights. The fuxes stayed flat on their platform . . . but the water was smooth, the ride was smooth, and nothing attacked them.

The rain stopped, and left Phrixus and Helle far up the morning sky. The cloud-highway of the Jet Stream showed through a broken cloud deck. Lightning and the other drivers left their headlights on, since the sea life seemed to avoid them.

Somewhere in there, Rachel reclined her chair and went to sleep.

She woke when the crawler settled and tilted under her. Her brain was muzzy . . . and she had slept with the recorder on. That disturbed her. Usually she switched it off to sleep. Dreams were private.

The crawler's door had dropped to form a stairway, and the crawler was empty. Rachel went out.

The crawlers, howlers, raft and mobile power plant were parked in a circle, and tents had been set up inside. There was no living human being in sight. Rachel shrugged; she stepped between a howler and the raft, and stopped.

This was nothing like the Medea she'd seen up to now.

Rolling hills were covered with chrome yellow bushes. They stood waist high, and so densely packed that no ground was visible anywhere. Clouds of insects swarmed, and sticky filaments shot up from the bushes to stab into the swarms.

The fuxes had cut themselves a clearing. They tended one who was restless, twitching. Bronze Legs Miller hailed her from their midst.

Rachel waded through the bushes. They resisted her like thick tar. The insects scattered away from her.

"Deadeye's near her time," Bronze Legs said. "Poor baby. We won't move on until she's dropped her 'nest'."

The fux showed no swelling of pregnancy. Rachel remembered what she had been told of the fux manner of bearing children. Suddenly she didn't want to see it. Yet how could she leave? She would be omitting a major part of the experience of Medea.

She compromised. She whispered earnestly to Bronze Legs, "Should we be here? Won't they object?"

He laughed. "We're here because we make good insect repellants."

"No. We like humans." Deadeye's voice was slurred. Now Rachel saw that the left eye was pink, with no pupil. "Are you the one who has been among the stars?"

"Yes."

The feverish fux reached up to take Rachel's hand. "So much strangeness in the world. When we know all of the world, it may be we will go among the stars too. You have great courage." Her fingers were slender and hard, like bones. She let go to claw at the hairless red rash between her front and back legs. Her tail thrashed suddenly, and Bronze Legs dodged.

The fux was quiet for a time. A six-legged fux sponged her back with water; the sponge seemed to be a Medean plant. Deadeye said, "I learned from humans that 'deadeye' meant 'accurate of aim'. I set out to be the best spear-caster in . . ." She trailed off into a language of barking and yelping. The odd-looking biped held conversation with her. Perhaps he was soothing her.

Deadeye howled — and fell apart. She crawled forward, pulling against

the ground with hands and forefeet, and her hindquarters were left behind. The hindquarters were red and dripping at the juncture, and the tail slid through them: more than a meter of thick black tail, stained with red, and as long as Harvester's now. The other fuxes came forward, some to tend Deadeye, some to examine the hindquarters . . . in which muscles were still twitching.

Ten minutes later Deadeye stood up. He made it look easy; given his tail and his low center of mass, perhaps it was. He spoke in his own language, and the fuxes filed away into the yellow bushes. In the human tongue Deadeye said, "I must guard my nest. Alone. Travel safely."

"See you soon," Bronze Legs said. He led Rachel after the fuxes. "He won't want company now. He'll guard the 'nest' till the little ones eat most of it and come out. Then he'll go sex-crazy, but by that time we'll be back. How are you feeling?"

"A little woozy," Rachel said. "Too much blood."

"Take my arm."

The color of their arms matched perfectly.

"Is she safe here? I mean he. Deadeye."

"He'll learn to walk faster than you think, and he's got his spear. We haven't seen anything dangerous around. Rachel, they don't have a safety hangup."

"I don't understand."

"Sometimes they get killed. Okay, they get killed. Deadeye has his reasons for being here. If his children live, they'll own this place. Some of the adults'll stay to help them along. That's how they get new territory."

Confusing. "You mean they have to be born here?"

"Right. Fuxes visit. They don't conquer. After awhile they have to go home. Grace is still trying to figure if that's physiology or just a social quirk. But sometimes they visit to give birth, and that's how they get new homes. I don't think fuxes'll ever be space travelers."

"We have it easier."

"That we do."

"Bronze Legs, I want to make love to you."

He missed a step. He didn't look at her. "No. Sorry."

"Then," she said a little desperately, "will you at least tell me what's wrong? Did I leave out a ritual, or take too many baths or something?"

Bronze Legs said, "Stage fright."

He sighed when he saw that she didn't understand. "Look, ordinarily I'd be looking for some privacy for us . . . which wouldn't be easy, because taking your clothes off in an unfamiliar domain . . . never mind. When I make love with a woman I don't want a billion strangers criticizing my technique."

"The memory tapes."

"Right. Rachel, I don't know *where* you find men who want that kind of

publicity. Windstorm and I, we let a post-male watch us once . . . but after all, they aren't *human*."

"I could turn off the tape."

"It records memories, right? Unless you forgot about me completely, which I choose to consider impossible, you'd be remembering me for the record. Wouldn't you?"

She nodded. And went back to the crawler to sleep. Others would be sleeping in the tents; she didn't want the company.

The howler's motor was half old, half new. The new parts had a handmade look: bulky, with file marks. One of the fans was newer, cruder, heavier than the other. Rachel could only hope the Medeans were good with machinery.

The tough-looking redhead asked, "Are you sure you want to go through with this?"

"I took a howler across most of Koschei," Rachel told her. She straightened, then swung up onto the saddle. Its original soft plastic seat must have disintegrated; what replaced it looked and felt like tanned skin. "Top speed, a hundred and forty kilometers an hour. Override — this switch — boosts the fans so I can fly. Ten minutes of flight, then the batteries block up and I've got to come down. Six slots in the ground-effect skirt so I can go in any direction. The main thing is to keep my balance. Especially when I'm flying."

Windstorm did not seem reassured. "You won't get that kind of performance out of a fifty-year-old machine. Treat it tender. And don't fly if you're in a hurry, because you'll be using most of the power just to keep you up. Two more things —" She reached out to put Rachel's hands on a switch and a knob. Her own hands were large and strong, with prominent veins. "Searchlight. This knob swings it around, and *this* raises and lowers it. It's your best weapon. If it doesn't work, flee. Second thing is your goggles. Sling them around your neck."

"Where are they?"

Windstorm dug goggles from the howler's saddlebag: a flexible strap and two large hemispheres of red glass. A similar set swung from her own neck. "You should never have to ask that question again on Medea. Here."

The other vehicles were ready to go. Windstorm jogged to her own howler, leaving Rachel with the feeling that she had failed a test.

It was past noon of the Medean day. Harvester was riding Giggles, the six-legged virgin. The rest of the fuxes rode the ground-effect raft. The vehicles rode high, above the forest of chrome yellow bushes.

Windstorm spoke from the intercom. "We stay ahead of the crawlers and to both sides. We're looking for anything dangerous. If you see something you're afraid of, sing out. Don't wait."

Rachel eased into position. The feel of the howler was coming back to her. It weighed half a kiloton, but you still did some of your steering by shifting weight. . . . "Windstorm, aren't you tired?"

"I got some sleep while Deadeye was dropping her hindquarters."

Maybe Windstorm didn't trust anyone else to supervise the rammer. Rachel was actually relieved. It struck her that most Medeans had lost too many of their "safety hangups."

The bushes ended sharply, at the shore of a fast-flowing river carrying broad patches of scarlet scum. Some of the patches bloomed with flowers of startling green. Harvester boarded the raft to cross.

There was wheatfield beyond, but the yellow plants were feathery and four meters high. Hemispheres of white rock appeared with suspicious regularity. The expedition had swung around to north-and-heatward. Argo stood above the peaks of a rounded mountain range. Many-limbed birds rode the air above them.

Rachel looked up to see one dropping toward her face.

She could see the hooked beak and great claws aiming at her eyes. Her blind fingers sought the searchlight controls. She switched on the searchlight and swung the beam around and up. Like a laser cannon: *first fire, then aim. Calmly, now.*

The beam found the bird and illuminated it in blue fire: a fearsome sight. Wings like oiled leather, curved meat-ripping beak, muscular forelegs with long talons: and the hind legs were long, slender, and tipped each with a single sword blade. They weren't for walking at all, nor for anything but weaponry.

The bird howled, shut its eyes tight, and tried to turn in the air. Its body curled in a ball; its wings folded around it. Rachel dropped the beam to keep it pinned until it smacked hard into the wheatfield.

The intercom said, "Nice."

"Thank you." Rachel sounded deceptively calm.

"Grace wants to call a halt," Windstorm said. "Up by that next boulder."

"Fine."

The boulders were all roughly the same size: fairly regular hemispheres one and a half meters across.

Grace and Bronze Legs came out of the crawler lugging instruments on a dolly. They unloaded a box on one side of the boulder, and Grace went to work on it. Bronze Legs moved the dolly around to the other side and unfurled a silver screen. When Rachel tried to speak, Grace shushed her. She fiddled a bit with various dials, then turned on the machine.

A shadow-show formed on the screen: a circle of shadow, and darker shapes within. Grace cursed and touched dials, feather-lightly. The blurred shadows took on detail.

Shadows of bones, lighter shadows of flesh. There were four oversized heads, mostly jaws, overlapping near the center; and four tails near the rim, and a maze of legs and spines between. Four creatures all wrapped intimately around each other to just fill the shell.

"I knew it!" Grace cried. "They were too regular. They had to be eggs or nests or plants or *something* like that. Windstorm, dear, if we pile this junk back on the dolly, can you tow it to the next rock?"

They did that. The next rock was very like the first: an almost perfect hemisphere with a surface like white plaster. Rachel rapped it with her knuckles. It felt like stone. But the deep-radar shadow showed three big-headed foetuses just filling their environment, plus a tiny one that had failed to grow.

"Well. They all seem to be at the same stage of development," Grace observed. "I wonder if it's a seasonal thing?"

Rachel shook her head. "It's different every time you turn around. Lord! You learn a place, you walk a couple of kilometers, you have to start all over again. Grace, don't you ever get frustrated? You can't run fast enough to stay in one place!"

"I love it. And it's worse than you think, dear." Grace folded the screen and stacked it on the dolly. "The domains don't stay the same. We have spillovers from other domains, from high winds and tidal slosh and migration. I'd say a Medean ecology is ruined every ten years. Then I have to learn it all over again. Windstorm, dear, I'd like to look at one more of these rock eggs. Will you tow —"

The windstorm was sudden and violent. "Damn it, Grace, this isn't the way we planned it! We do our biological research on the way back! *After* we set up the power system, *then* we can give the local monsters a chance to wreck us."

Grace's voice chilled. "Dear, it seems to me that this bit of research is quite harmless."

"It uses up time and supplies. We'll do it on the way back, when we know we've *got* the spare time. We've been through this. Pack up the deep-radar and let's move."

Now the rolling hills of feather-wheat sloped gently up toward an eroded mountain range whose peaks seemed topped with pink cotton. The three-legged female, Gimpy, trotted alongside Rachel, talking of star travel. Her gait was strange, rolling, but she kept up as long as Rachel held her howler to the power plant's twenty KPH.

She could not grasp interstellar distances. Rachel didn't push. She spoke of wonders instead: of the rings of Saturn, and the bubble cities of Lluagor, and the Smithpeople, and the settling of whale and dolphin

colonies in strange oceans. She spoke of time compression: of gifting Sereda with designs for crude steam engines and myriads of wafer-sized computer brains, and returning to find steam robots everywhere: farmland, city streets, wilderness, households, disneylands; of fads that could explode across a planet and vanish without a trace, like tobacco pipes on Koschei, op-art garments on Earth, weight lifting on low gravity Horvendile.

It was long before she got Gimpy talking about herself.

"I was of my parent's second litter, within a group that moved here to study your kind," Gimpy said. "They taught us bow and arrow, and a better design of shovel, and other things. We might have died without them."

"The way you said that: second litter. Is there a difference?"

"Yes. One has the first litter when one can. The second litter comes to one who proves her capability by living that long. The third litter, the male's litter, comes only with the approval of one's clan. Else the male is not allowed to breed."

"That's good genetics." Rachel saw Gimpy's puzzlement. "I mean that your custom makes better fuxes."

"It does. I will never see my second litter," Gimpy said. "I was young when I made my mistake, but it was foolish. The breed improves. I will not be a one-legged male."

They moved into a rift in the eroded mountain range, and the incredible became obvious. The mountains were topped with pink cotton candy. It must have been sticky like cotton candy, too. Rachel could see animals trapped in it. Gimpy wanted no part of that. She dropped back and boarded the raft.

They crossed the cotton candy with fans blasting at maximum. The big vehicles blew pink froth in all directions. Something down there wasn't trapped at all. A ton of drastically flattened pink snail, with a perfect snail shell perched jauntily on its back, cruised over the cotton candy leaving a slime trail that bubbled and expanded to become more pink froth. It made for the still corpse of a many-limbed bird, flowed over it, and stopped to digest it.

The strangeness was getting to Rachel; and that was a strange thing for her. She was a rammer. Strangeness was the one constant in her life. Born aboard a ramship, not *Morven*, she had already gone once around the trade circuit. Even a rammer who returned to a world he knew must expect to find it completely changed; and Rachel *knew* that. But the strangeness of Medea came faster than she could swallow it or spit it out.

She fiddled with the intercom until she got Grace.

"Yes, dear, I'm driving. What is it?"

"It's confusion. Grace, why aren't all planets like Medea? They've all got domains, don't they? Deserts, rain forests, mountains, poles and

equators . . . you see what I mean?"

She heard the xenobiologist's chuckle. "Dear, the Cold Pole is covered with frozen carbon dioxide. Where we're going it's hotter than boiling water. What is there on the trade circuit worlds that splits up the domains? Mountain ranges? An ocean for a heat sink? Temperature, altitude, rainfall? Medea has all of that, plus the one-way winds and the one-way ocean currents. The salinity goes from pure water to pure salt. The glaciers carry veins of dry ice heatward, so there are sudden jumps in the partial pressure of carbon dioxide. Some places there are no tides. Other places, Argo wobbles enough to make a terrific tidal slosh. Then again, everything has to adapt to the flares. Some animals have shells. Some sea beasts can dive deep. Some plants seed, others grow a big leaf for an umbrella."

Beyond the pass the mountains dropped more steeply, down to an arm of the Ring Sea. Rachel had no problem controlling the howler, but the mobile power plant was laboring hard, with its front vents wide open to hold it back and little pressure left for steering. There should be no real danger. Two probes had mapped this course.

"Everything is *more* different, huh?"

"Excuse me, dear . . . that's got it. Sonofabitch, we could live without that sonofabitching tail wind. Okay. Do you remember the mock turtle we showed you yesterday evening? We've traced it six thousand kilometers to coldward. In the Icy Sea it's seagoing and much larger. Follow it heatward and it gets smaller and more active. We think it's the food supply. Glaciers stir up the bottom, and the sea life loves that. To heatward a bigger beast starves . . . sometimes. But we could be wrong. Maybe it has to conserve heat in the colder climates. I'd like to try some experiments, someday."

The white boulders that turned out to be giant eggs were thicker here on the heatward slopes. And on the lower slopes — But this was *strange*.

The mountainsides were gay with pennants. Thousands of long, flapping flags, orange or chrome yellow. Rachel tried to make it out. Grace was still talking; Rachel began to feel she'd opened a Pandora's Box.

"The closer you look to the Hot Pole, the more competition you find among the sea life. New things flow in from coldward, constantly. All the six-limbed and eight-limbed forms, we think they were forced onto the land, kicked out of the ocean by something bigger or meaner. They left the ocean before they could adopt the usual fish shape, which is four fins and a tail."

"Grace, wait a minute, now. Are you saying . . . we . . ."

"Yes, dear." The smile Rachel couldn't see had to be a smirk. "Four limbs and a tail. We dropped the tail, but the human form is perfectly designed for a fish."

Rachel switched her off.

The hillside trees had extensive root systems that gripped rock like a strong man's fist, and low, almost conical trunks. On each tree the tip of the trunk sprouted a single huge leaf, a flapping flag, orange or chrome yellow and ragged at the end. All pennants and no armies. Some of the flags were being torn apart by the air blast from the ground-effect vehicles. Perhaps that was how they spread their seeds, Rachel thought. Like tapeworms. Ask Grace? She'd had enough of Grace, and she'd probably have to start with an apology

The day brightened as if clouds had passed from before the sun.

The slopes were easing off into foothills now. Gusts of wind turned some of the flapping pennants into clouds of confetti. It was easier to go through the papery storms than to steer around. Rachel used one hand as a visor; the day had turned quite bright. Was she carrying dark glasses? Of course, the goggles —

It was a flare!

She kept her eyes resolutely lowered until she'd pulled the red cups over her eyes and adjusted them. Then she turned to look. The suns were behind her left shoulder, and one was nearly lost in the white glare of the other.

* * *

Bronze Legs was asleep in a reclined passenger chair in the trailing crawler. It was like sleeping aboard a boat at anchor . . . but the sudden glare woke him instantly.

Going downhill, the mobile power plant rode between the two crawlers, for greater safety. The angle of descent hadn't seriously hampered the ponderous makeshift vehicle. But all bets were off now. *Flare!*

The fuxes were still on the raft. They could be hurt if they tumbled off at this speed, but their every instinct must be telling them to get off and dig. Bronze Legs flattened his nose against the windscreen. Charles "Hairy" McBundy, fighting to slow the power plant and raft, wouldn't have attention to spare; and there *had* to be a place to stop. Somewhere close, somewhere flat, dirt rather than rock, and damn quick! There, to the left? Not quite flat, and it ended short, in a cliff. Tough. Bronze Legs hit the intercom button and screamed, "Hard left, Hairy, and when you stop, stop fast!"

Hairy was ahead of him. Vents had already opened in the air cushion skirts of raft and power plant. Robbed of thrust through the forward vents, the vehicles surged left and forward. Bronze Legs' teeth ground against each other. One silver parasol had opened on the raft, probably Harvester's, and five sharp fux faces were under it. Their tails thrashed with their agitation.

Grace brought the crawler around to follow. Left and forward, too fast, like the power plant. Hairy was on the ledge now. He cut his air cushion all at once. The power plant dropped. Its skirt screamed against rock,

then dirt, then, at the edge of the drop, quit. The fuxes boiled off the raft, raised parasols, and began digging.

The crawler vibrated sickeningly as Grace cut the air cushion.

She was wearing her ruby goggles. So was Bronze Legs; he must have donned them without help from his conscious mind. He glanced again at the fuxes and saw only silver disks and a fog of brown dirt. The other crawler had stopped on the slant.

Windstorm's howler sat tilted, but not rolling. Windstorm herself was sprinting uphill. Good enough. She should be inside, in one of the crawlers. Strange things could emerge in flare time. Where was the other howler pilot?

Far downslope and losing ground. Too far to climb back in any reasonable time. That was Rachel, the rammer, wasn't it? With a little skill she could turn the howler and use the larger rear vents to bring her back; but she wasn't showing that skill. She seemed to be trying to back up. Not good at all.

"Grace? Can we take the crawler down to her?"

"We may have to try. Try the intercom first, dear. See if you can talk her back up."

Bronze Legs tried. "Her intercom's off."

"Off? Really? The little idiot —"

"And she's not about to notice the little light. Wait, here she comes."

Rachel's howler lifted on emergency power, hovered, then started uphill.

Grace said, "She may have trouble landing."

Then Bronze Legs saw what was happening around them.

To Rachel it seemed that everyone was in panic. Far above her, both crawlers and the power plant had come to a screeching halt. Tough, competent Windstorm had abandoned her own vehicle and was fleeing in terror from nothing visible. The fuxes, the native Medeans, were nowhere in sight. Could they *all* know something Rachel didn't?

She was having her own problems. The damned obsolete sluggish howler refused to back up; it coasted slowly, frictionlessly downhill, further and further from safety. To hell with that. She flipped the override.

The howler went up. Rachel leaned far back, and the howler tilted with her, staying low, following the upward curve of terrain. If the power quit early she wanted some chance to land. But the howler purred nicely uphill, faster now, while Rachel concentrated on her balance. She was marginally aware that the gay orange pennants had all turned to dead black crepe, and that certain round white boulders were cracking, crumbling.

But when things emerged from the boulders, she screamed.

All in an instant the mountains were acrawl with a thousand monsters.

Their skins were shiny white. Their eyes were mere slits in heads that were mostly teeth. As Rachel rose toward the precarious safety of the crawlers, the creatures chose their target and converged. They ran with bodies low, tails high, legs an invisible blur. In seconds that meager flat place where the crawlers rested was covered with rock demons.

No safety there.

She flew over the crawlers, glimpsed peering faces behind the wind-screens, and kept going. The boulders had been rare near the crest, and the rock demons weren't there yet. Neither was Rachel, of course. She'd get as far as possible before the howler quit. And then what?

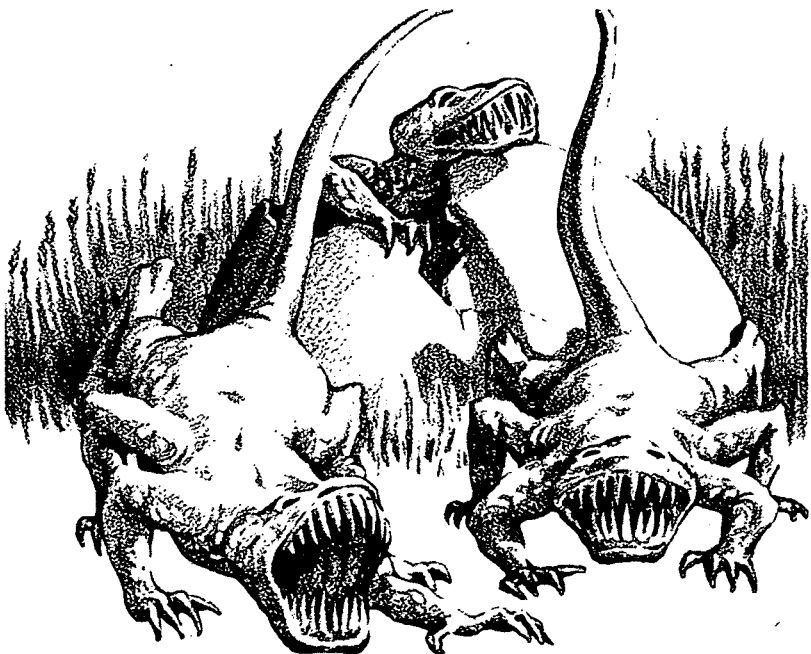
She flipped on the headlights and the searchlight too. The rock demons thrived in flare time, but even they might fear too much flare sunlight. It was worth a try.

The mountain's rock face grew steeper, steeper. No place to land, unless she could reach the crest. The fans howled.

Here was the ridge, coming level. Rachel cursed venomously. The crest was carpeted in pink, sticky cotton candy. Its proprietors had withdrawn into huge snail shells.

The howl of the fans dropped from contralto toward bass.

Pale six-legged monsters, searching for meat on bare rock, turned big



heads to squint as Rachel sank low. They blurred into motion.

The crawler coasted just above the pink froth, riding the ground effect now, not really flying. Strange corpses and strange skeletons were marooned in that sea. The wind from the fans was full of pink froth.

Then she had crossed and was coasting downhill, and it was already too late to land. The howler rode centimeters above the rock, too fast and gaining speed. Here the slope was shallower, and she was still in the pass chosen long ago by Medeans monitoring a tractor probe. But the howler rode too low. If she opened a slot to brake, the skirt would scrape rock, the howler would flip over. Find a level spot —

A quick glance back told her she didn't want to stop anyway. A dozen of the rock demons had crossed the cotton candy. Probably used their siblings for stepping stones after *they* got stuck! Rachel held hard to her sanity and concentrated on staying right side up. The things were holding their own in the race. Maybe they were even catching up.

Bronze Legs squeezed between the crates and the roof to reach the crawler's observation bubble. It was big enough for his head and shoulders. He found one of the rock demons with its forelegs wrapped around the bubble, blocking part of his view while it gnawed at the glass.

Rock demons swarmed on the ground. The fuxes couldn't be seen, but a few rock demons lay unnaturally quiet where the fuxholes were, and Bronze Legs saw a spear thrust through the melee. He called down, "Try the searchlights."

"Won't work," Grace answered. She tried it anyway. Other searchlights joined hers, and the thrashing rock demons blazed painfully bright even through goggles. They turned, squinted at the situation, then came all in a quick rush. The bronze spearhead on Harvester's tail stabbed deep into a straggler. The rock demon's blood jetted an incredible distance. It died almost instantly.

If there were live fuxes under the somewhat tattered silver parasols, they were safe now. All the rock demons were swarming around the vehicles' searchlights. They *liked* the light.

Grace chortled. "Tell me you expected *that*!"

"I wouldn't dare. I feel a lot safer now." The monsters weren't tearing at the lights; they fought each other for a place in the glare. "What do they think they're doing?"

"We've seen this kind of reaction before," Grace answered. "Medean life either loves flares or hates them. All the flare-loving forms act like they're programmed to stay out of shadows during flares. Like, in the shadow of a mountain they'd be in just the conditions they aren't designed for. Most of 'em have high blood pressure, too, and terrific reserves of energy. They have to accomplish a lot in the little time a flare

lasts. Be born, eat, grow, mate, give birth —”

“Grace, get on the intercom and find out if everyone’s still alive. And see if anyone knows which sun flared.”

“Why? What possible difference could it make?”

“Phrixus flares last up to three quarters of an hour. Helle flares don’t last as long. We’re going to have to wait it out. And see if Rachel called anyone.”

“Right.”

Bronze Legs half-listened to the intercom conversation. Along the heatward slopes of the mountains the black flags flew in triumph, growing longer almost as Bronze Legs watched, making sugar while the sun flared. The rock demons milling in the searchlight beams were now hungry enough to be attacking each other in earnest. A vastly larger number of rock demons had deserted the mountainsides entirely, had swarmed straight down to the shoreline. The waves were awash with sea monsters of all sizes; the rock demons were wading out to get them.

Grace called up to him. “Rachel didn’t call anyone. Lightning says she made it over the crest.”

“Good.”

“What do you think she’ll do?”

“Nobody knows her very well. Hmm . . . She won’t land in the cotton candy. She probably could, because those snails are probably hiding in their shells. Right?”

—“But she won’t. It’d be too messy. She’ll stop on the coldward slope, or beyond, anywhere it’s safe to wait it out. If there is anywhere. Do you think she’ll find anywhere safe?”

“She won’t know what’s safe. She won’t find anyplace that isn’t swarming with *something*, not this far to heatward. The further you look to heatward, the more ferocious the competition gets.”

“Then she’ll keep going. If she doesn’t wreck herself, she’ll go straight back to Touchdown City. Let’s see, *Morven*’s on the other side of the planet now. Say it’ll be up in an hour, and we’ll let them know what’s happening. That way we’ll know she’s safe almost as soon as she does. Grace, you don’t think she’d try to rejoin us?”

“She can’t get lost, and she can’t stop, and Touchdown’s visible from fifty miles away. She’ll just head home. Okay . . .” There was a funny edge of doubt in Grace’s voice. She stabbed at an intercom button. “Lightning? Me. You watched Rachel go over the crest, right? Did she have her headlights on?”

Bronze Legs was wondering just how teed off the rammers would be if Rachel was dead. It took him a moment to see the implications of what Grace was saying.

“The searchlight too? All right, Lightning. The long range sender is on your roof. I want it ready to send a message to *Morven* by the time

Morven rises, which will be to south of coldward in about an hour. . . . No, don't go out yet. The way the beasts are running around they should die of heatstroke pretty quick. When they fall off the roof, you go."

The rock demons followed Rachel twelve kilometers downslope before anything distracted them.

The howler was riding higher now, but Rachel wasn't out of trouble. The emergency override locked the vents closed. If she turned it off the power would drop, and so would the howler. She was steering with her weight alone. Her speed would last as long as she was going down. She had almost run out of mountain. The slope leveled off as it approached the river.

The vicious pegasus-type birds had disappeared. The rolling mountainsides covered with feathery wheat were now covered with stubble, stubble with a hint of motion in it, dark flecks that showed and were gone. Millions of mice, maybe?

Whatever: they were meat. The demons scattered in twelve directions across the stubble, their big heads snapping, snapping. Rachel leaned forward across her windscreen to get more speed. Behind her, three rock demons converged on a golden Roman shield . . . on a mock-turtle that had been hidden by feather-wheat and was now quite visible and helpless. The demons turned it over and ripped it apart and ate and moved on.

The howler slid across the shore and onto flowing water.

Each patch of scarlet scum had sprouted a great green blossom. Rachel steered between the stalks by body english. She was losing speed, but the shore was well behind her now.

And all twelve rock demons zipped downhill across the stubble and into the water. Rachel held her breath. Could they *swim*? They were under water, drinking or dispersing heat or both. Now they arched upward to reach the air.

The howler coasted to a stop in midstream.

Rachel nerved herself to switch off the override. The howler dropped, and hovered in a dimple of water, churning a fine mist that rapidly left Rachel dripping wet. She waited. Come what may, at least the batteries were recharging. Give her time and she'd have a howler that could steer, and fly.

The heatward shore was black with a million mouse-sized beasties. They'd cleaned the field of feather-wheat; but what did they think they were doing now? Watching Rachel? The rock demons noticed. They waded clumsily out of the water and, once on land, blurred into motion. The shore churned with six-legged white marauders and tiny black prey.

It seemed the fates had given Rachel a break. The water seemed quite empty but for the scarlet scum and its huge blossoms. No telling what might be hugging the bottom while the flare passed. Rachel could wait

too. The coldward shore looked safe enough . . . though it had changed. Before the flare, it had been one continuous carpet of chrome yellow bushes. The bushes were still there, but topped now with a continuous sheet of silver blossoms. The clouds of insects swarmed still, though they might be different insects.

Upstream, something was walking toward her on stilts. It came at its own good time, stopping frequently. Rachel kept her eye on it while she tried the intercom.

She got static on all bands. Mountains blocked her from the expedition; other mountains blocked her from Touchdown City. The one sender that could reach *Morven* in orbit was on a crawler. Dammit. She never noticed the glowing pinpoint that meant Bronze Legs had called. It was too dim.

Onshore, two of the rock demons were mating head-to-tail.

The thing upstream seemed to be a great silver Daddy-long-legs. Its legs were slender and almost long enough to bridge the river; its torso proportionately tiny. It paused every so often to reach deep into the water with the thumbless hands on its front legs. The hands were stubby, armored in chitin, startlingly quick. They dipped, they rose at once with something that struggled, they conveyed the prey to its mouth. Its head was wide and flat, like a clam with bulging eyes. It stepped delicately downstream, with all the time in the world . . . and it was bigger than Rachel had realised, and *faster*.

So much for her rest break. She opened the rear vent. The howler slid across the river and onto shore, and stopped, nudging the bushes.

The Daddy-long-legs was following her. Ten of the dozen rock demons were wading across. As the bottom dipped the six-legged beasts rose to balance on four legs, then two. As bipeds they were impressively stable. Maybe their tails trailed in the mud bottom to serve as anchors. And the mice were coming too. Thousands of them, swimming in a black carpet among the patches of scum.

Rachel used the override for fifteen seconds. It was enough to put her above the silver-topped bushes. The lily-pad-shaped silver blossoms bowed beneath the air blast, but the ground effect held her. She wasn't making any great speed. Bugs swarmed around her. Sticky filaments shot from between the wide silver lily pads, and sometimes found bugs, and sometimes struck the fans or the ground effect skirt.

She looked for the place that had been cleared for a fux encampment. Deadeye would be there, a feisty male biped guarding his nest, if Deadeye still lived. She couldn't find the gap in the bushes. It struck her that that was good luck for Deadeye, considering what was following her.

But she was lonely, and scared.

The Daddy-long-legs stepped delicately among the bushes. Bushes rustled to show where ten rock demons streaked after her, veering to

snatch a meal from whatever was under the blossoms, then resuming course. Of the plant-eating not-mice there was no sign, except that here and there a bush had collapsed behind her.

But they were all falling behind as the fuel cells poured power into the howler's batteries.

Rachel oriented herself by Argo and the Jet Stream and headed south and coldward. She was very tired. The land was darkening, reddening . . . and it came to her that the flare was dying.

The flare was dying. The goggles let Bronze Legs look directly at the suns, now, to see the red arc enclosing the bright point of Helle. A bubble of hellfire was rising, cooling, expanding into the vacuum above the lesser hell of a red dwarf star.

There were six-legged rock demons all around them, and a few on the roofs. All were dead, from heatstroke or dehydration. A far larger number were gathering all along the Ring Sea shore. Now they swarmed uphill in a wave of silver. They paired off as they came, and stopped by twos in the rocks to mate.

The diminished wave swept around the expedition and petered out. Now the mountains were covered with writhing forms: an impressive sight. "They make the beast with twelve legs," Bronze Legs said. "Look at the size of those bellies! Hey, Grace, aren't the beasts themselves bigger than they were?"

"They have to be. They've got to form those eggs. Dammit, don't distract me."

The intercom lit. Grace wasn't about to notice anything so mundane. The paired rock demons were growing quiet, but they were still linked head to tail. Bronze Legs opened the intercom.

Lightning's voice said, "I've got Duty Officer Toffler aboard *Morven*."

"Okay. Toffler, this is Miller. We've got an emergency."

"Sorry to hear it." The male voice sounded sleepy. "What can we do about it?"

"You'll have to call Touchdown City. Can you patch me through, or shall I record a message?"

"Let's check . . ." The voice went away. Bronze Legs watched a nearby pair of rock demons crawling away from each other. The thick torsos seemed different. A belly swelling that had extended the length of the torso was now a prominent swelling between the middle and hind legs. It was happening fast. The beasts seemed gaunt, all bone and skin, except for the great spherical swelling. With fore and middle legs they scratched at the earth, digging, digging.

"Miller, you'd better record. By the time we got their attention they'd be over the horizon. We'll have them in another hour."

"Good —"

"But I don't see how they can help you either. Listen, Miller, is there something we can do with an interstellar message laser? At this range we can melt a mountain or boil a lake, and be accurate to —"

"Dammit, Toffler, *we're* not in trouble! Touchdown City's in trouble, and they don't know it yet!"

"Oh? Okay, set to record."

"To Mayor Curly Jackson, Touchdown City. We've weathered the flare. We don't know if the fuxes survived yet. The rammer, Rachel Subramaniam, is on her way to you on a howler. She has no reason to think she's dangerous, but she is. By the time you spot her you'd be too late to stop her. If you don't move damn quick, the human colony on Medea could be dead within the year. You'll need every vehicle you can get your hands on . . ."

The expedition had crossed a great bay of the Ring Sea in twelve hours. Rachel could cross it in three; but she'd be rid of what followed her moments after she left shore. She had heard Lightning mention the parasitic fungus that floated on this arm of the Ring Sea, that was deadly to fuxes and any Medean life . . . unless the flare had burned it away.

The flare was long over. She rode through the usual red-lit landscape, in a circle of the white light from headlights, taillights, searchlight. She hungered and thirsted for the light of farming lamps, the color of Sol, of ship's sunlights; the sign that she had come at last to Touchdown City.

But she hungered more for the fungus that would kill the rock demons and the Daddy-long-legs. She hated them for their persistence, their monstrous shapes, their lust for her flesh. She hated them for being themselves! Let them rot, slow or quick. Then three hours to cross the bay, half an hour more to find and navigate that rubble-strewn pass, and downhill toward bluewhite light.

That was the shoreline ahead.

Ominously blood-colored beasts milled there. One by one they turned toward the howler.

Rachel cursed horribly and without imagination. She had seen these things before. The expedition's searchlights had pinned a tremendous thousand-legged worm, and these things had been born from its flesh. They were dog-sized, tail-less quadrupeds. Flare time must have caught a lot of the great myriapods, brought vast populations of parasites to life, for this many to be still active this long after the flare.

More than active. They leapt like fleas . . . toward Rachel. She turned to heatward. Weak as she felt now, *one* could knock her out of the saddle.

Her entourage turned with her. Two more rock demons had dropped out. Eight followed, and the great spider, and a loyal population of proto-mice, exposed now that the bushes had ended. And hordes of insects. Rachel's reason told her that she was taking this all too personally.

But what did they *see* in her? She wasn't that much meat, and the spider wasn't that hungry. It reached down now and then to pluck a proto-mouse, and once it plucked up a rock demon, with equal nonchalance. The demon raved and snapped and died within the spider's clamshell mouth, but it clawed out an eye, too.

And the demons had the proto-mice for food, but they had to streak down to the water every so often to cool off, and fight their way back through the blood-red quadrupeds, eating what they killed. The mice had fed well on the yellow bushes, and who knew about the tiny might-be-insects? *What did they all want with Rachel?*

After a couple of hours the shore curved south, and now it was white tinged with other colors: a continuous crust of salt. Rachel's climate suit worked well, but her face and hands were hot. The wind was hot with Argo-heat and the heat of a recent flare. The Daddy-long-legs had solved its heat problem. It waded offshore, out of reach of the red parasites, pacing her.

It was five hours before the shore turned sharply to coldward. Rachel turned with it, staying well back from shore, where blood-colored quadrupeds still prowled. She worried now about whether she could find the pass. There would be black, tightly curled ground cover, and trees foliated in gray hair with a spoon-shaped silhouette; and sharp-edged young mountains to the south. But she felt stupid with fatigue, and she had never adjusted to the light and never would: dull red from Argo, pink from two red dwarf suns nearing sunset.

More hours passed. She saw fewer of the red parasites. Once she caught the Daddy-long-legs with another rock demon in its clamshell jaws. The hexapod's own teeth tore at the side of the spider's face . . . the side that was already blind. Flare-loving forms used themselves up fast. Those trees . . .

Rachel swung her searchlight around. The ground cover, the "black man's hair," was gone. A black fog of insects swarmed over bare dirt. But the trees were hairy, with a spoon-shaped silhouette. How far had those trees spread on Medea? She could be in the wrong place . . .

She turned left, uphill.

There were low mountains ahead, young mountains, all sharp edges. A kilometer short, Rachel turned to parallel them. The pass had been so narrow. She could go right past it. She slowed down, then, impatient, speeded up again. Narrow it had been, but straight. Perhaps she would see farming lamps shining through it. She noticed clouds forming, and began cursing to drive away thoughts of rain.

When the light came it was more than a glimmer.

She saw a sun, a white sun, a *real* sun, shining against the mountains. As if flare time had come again! But Phrixus and Helle were pink dots sinking in the west. She swerved toward the glare. The rising ground

slowed her, and she remembered the spider plodding patiently behind her; she didn't turn to look.

The glare grew terribly bright. She slowed further, puzzled and frightened. She pulled the goggles up over her eyes. That was better; but still she saw nothing but that almighty glare at the end of a bare rock pass.

She rode into the pass, into the glare, into a grounded sun.

Her eyes adjusted

The rock walls were lined with vehicles: flyers, tractor probes, trucks, crawlers converted to firefighting and ambulance work, anything that could move on its own was there, and each was piled with farming lamps and batteries, and all the farming lamps were on. An aisle had been left between them. Rachel coasted down the aisle. She thought she could make out man-shaped shadows in the red darkness beyond.

They were human. By the pale mane around his head she recognised Mayor Curly Jackson.

Finally, finally, she slowed the howler, let it sink to the ground, and stepped off. Human shapes came toward her. One was Mayor Curly. He took her arm, and his grip drove pain even through the fog of fatigue. "You vicious little idiot," he said.

She blinked.

He snarled and dropped her arm and turned to face the pass. Half the population of Touchdown City stood looking down the aisle of light, ignoring Rachel . . . pointedly. She didn't try to shoulder between them. She climbed into the howler's saddle to see.

They were there: half a dozen rock demons grouped beneath the long legs of the spider; a black carpet of proto-mice; all embedded in a cloud of bright motes, insects. The monsters strolled up the aisle of light, and the watching men backed away. It wasn't necessary. Where the light stopped, Rachel's entourage stopped too.

Mayor Curly turned. "Did it *once* occur to you that something might be following your lights? Your *flare-colored* lights? You went through half a dozen domains, and every one had its own predators and its own plant eaters, and you brought them all *here*, you gutless moron! How many kinds of insects are there in that swarm? How many of them would eat our crops down to the ground before it poisoned them? Those little black things on the ground, they're plant-eaters too, aren't they? All flare-loving forms, and you brought them all here to *breed*! The next time a flare goes off would have been the last time any Medean human being had anything to eat! *You'd* be safe, of course. All you'd have to do is fly on to another star . . . "

The only way a human being can turn off her ears is to turn off her mind. Rachel didn't know whether she fainted or not. Probably she was led away rather than carried. Her next memory began some time later, beneath the light of home, with the sounds and the smells of home around

her, strapped down in free fall aboard the web ramship *Morven*.

On the curve of the wall the mobile power plant and one of the crawlers had finally left the realms of crusted salt. They ran over baked dirt now. The howler was moored in the center of the ground-effect raft, surrounded by piles of crates. It would be used again only by someone willing to wear a spacesuit. The four remaining fuxes were in the crawlers. Argo was out of camera range, nearly overhead. The view shifted and dipped with the motion of the trailing crawler.

"No, the beasts didn't actually do any harm. We did more damage to ourselves," Mayor Curly said. He wasn't looking at Captain Borg. He was watching the holo wall. A cup of coffee cooled in his hand. "We moved every single farming lamp out of the croplands and set them all going in the pass, right? And the flare-loving life forms just stayed there till they died. They aren't really built to take more than a couple of hours of flare time, what they'd get if both suns flared at once, and they aren't built to walk away from flarelight either. Maybe some of the insects bred. Maybe the big forms were carrying seeds and insect eggs in their hair. We know the six-legged types tried to breed as soon as we turned off the lamps, but they weren't in shape for it by then. It doesn't matter now. I suppose I should . . ."

He turned and looked at her. "In fact, I do thank you most sincerely for melting that pass down to lava. There can't be anything living in it now."

"So you came out of it with no damage."

"Not really. The locusts hurt us. We moved the farming lamps in a hurry, but we took our own good time getting them back in place. That was a mistake. Some flare-hating bugs were just waiting to taste our corn."

"Too bad."

"And a nest of B-70s killed two children in the oak grove."

Captain Borg's mind must have been elsewhere. "You really reamed Rachel out."

"I did," Curly said, without satisfaction and without apology.

"She was almost catatonic. We had to take her back up to *Morven* before she'd talk to anyone. Curly, is there any way to convince her she didn't make a prize idiot of herself?"

"At a guess I'd say no. Why would anyone want to?"

Captain Borg was using her voice of command now. "I dislike sounding childish, especially to you, Curly, but baby talk may be my best option. The problem is that Rachel didn't have any fun on Medea."

"You're breaking my heart."

"She won't even talk about coming down. She didn't like Medea. She didn't like the light, or the animals, or the way the fuxes bred. Too bloody. She went through thirty-odd hours of hell with your power plant

expedition, and came back tired to death and being chased by things out of nightmare, and when she finally got to safety you called her a dangerous incompetent idiot and made her believe it. She didn't even get laid on Medea — ”

“What?”

“Never mind, it's trivial. Or maybe it's absolutely crucial, but *skip* it. Curly, I have sampled the official memory tape of Medea, the one we would have tried to peddle when we got back into the trade circuit — ”

Curly's eyes got big. “O-o-oh shit!”

“It comes to you, does it? That tape was an ugly experience. It's unpleasant, and uncomfortable, and humiliating, and exhausting, and scary, and there's no sex. That's Rachel's view of Medea, and there *isn't* any other, and *nobody's* going to enjoy it.”

Curly had paled. “What do we do? Put Rachel's equipment on somebody else?”

“I wouldn't wear it. No rammer is really manic about her privacy, but there are limits. What about a Medean?”

“Who?”

“Don't you have any compulsive exhibitionists?”

Curly shook his head. “I'll ask around, but . . . no, maybe I won't. Doesn't it tell you something, that she couldn't get screwed? What man could go with a woman, knowing she'll be peddling the memory of it to millions of strangers? Yuk.”

The crawlers had stopped. Human shapes stepped outside, wearing skintight pressure suits and big transparent bubbles over their heads. They moved around to the ground-effect raft and began opening crates.

“It's no good. Curly, it's not easy to find people to make memory tapes. For a skill tape you need a genuine expert with twenty or thirty years experience behind him, plus a sharp-edged imagination and a one track mind and no sense of privacy. And Rachel's a tourist. She's got all of that, and she can learn new skills at the drop of a hat. She's very reactive, very emotive.”

“And she very nearly wiped us out.”

“She'll be making tapes till she dies. And every time something reminds her of Medea, her entire audience is going to know just what she thinks of the planet.”

“What'll happen to us?”

“Oh . . . we could be worried over nothing. I've seen fads before. This whole memory tape thing could be ancient history by the time we get back to civilization.”

Civilization? As opposed to what? Curly knew the answer to that one. He went back to watching the wall.

“And even if it's not . . . I'll be back. I'll bring another walking memory like Rachel, but more flexible. Okay?”

"How long?"

"One circuit, then back to Medea."

Sixty to seventy earthyears. "Good," said Curly, because there was certainly no way to talk her into any shorter journey. He watched men in silver suits setting up the frames for the solar mirrors. There was not even wind in the Hot End, and apparently no life at all. They had worried about that. But Curly saw nothing that could threaten Touchdown City's power supply for hundreds of years to come.

If Medea was to become a backwash of civilization, a land of peasants, then it was good that the farmlands were safe. Curly turned to Janice Borg to say so. But the rammer's eyes were seeing nothing on Medea, and her mind was already approaching Horvendile.

MARSPROBE

The manless wandering in deep space
to touch briefly the soil of another world,
questing for a hint of life
on the Martian dawn —

it is the first exploration
of something beyond Spain and her Incas,
beyond Columbus and the east never found —
the riches to be seen were more
than gold, silver or spice but,
on dry, desert, inferno-cold soil,
there was no trace of a breath of God:
only a handful of sand.

We find ourselves alone
and lost to another legend,
listening to whispers in the Cosmos,
the echoes of nebulae —
dust falling in empty halls.

— Steven M. Tymon

Flare Time 161

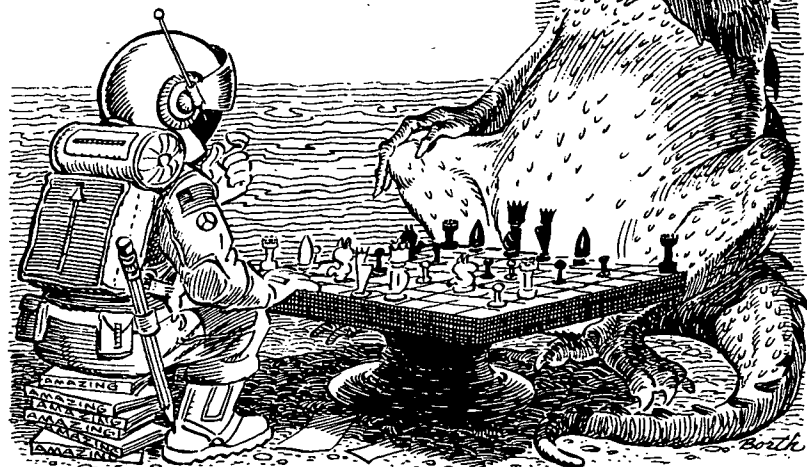
THE OBSERVATORY

by George H. Scithers

Back in February of this year, Gary Gygax of TSR Hobbies, Inc., invited us to come and work for him. A few days later, Arthur Bernhardt, former owner and publisher of this magazine, asked us if we'd like to buy it from him. We put the two in touch with each other — and suddenly we found ourself scrambling to get manuscripts, have them type-set and illustrated — and so to this, the first TSR Hobbies, Inc./Dragon Publishing issue of the world's oldest scientfiction magazine. It has been a busy time!

With this issue, we have come back up to bi-monthly publication. If circulation improves, we will go monthly soon. We have increased the length of the magazine by 32 pages and increased the type size. We have material on hand from Poul Anderson, Gregory Benford, Gene Wolfe, R. Bretnor, Tanith Lee, Somtow Sucharitkul, and Avram Davidson; from long-time regulars Robert Adams, David R. Bunch, and Darrell Schweitzer; and many more.

We hope you all — old friends and first-time readers alike — will like what we've done. If you do, then — with the support of our writers and artists and the solid backing of our publisher — we will reach our goal: First & best in scientfiction — again!





EXTRA EXTRA
Brotherly Love Bulletin

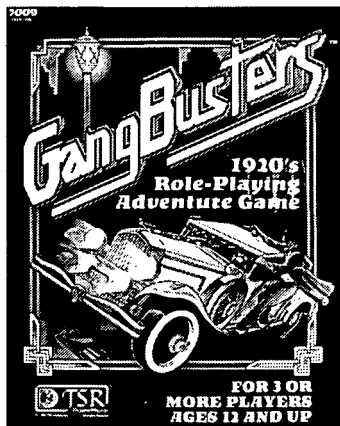
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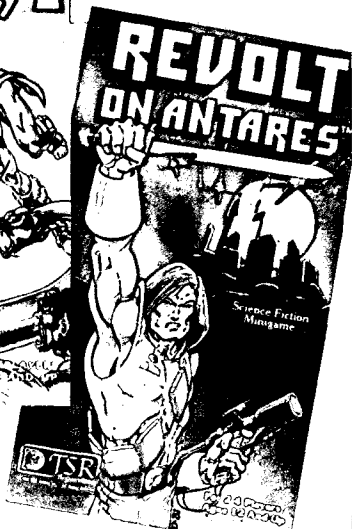
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